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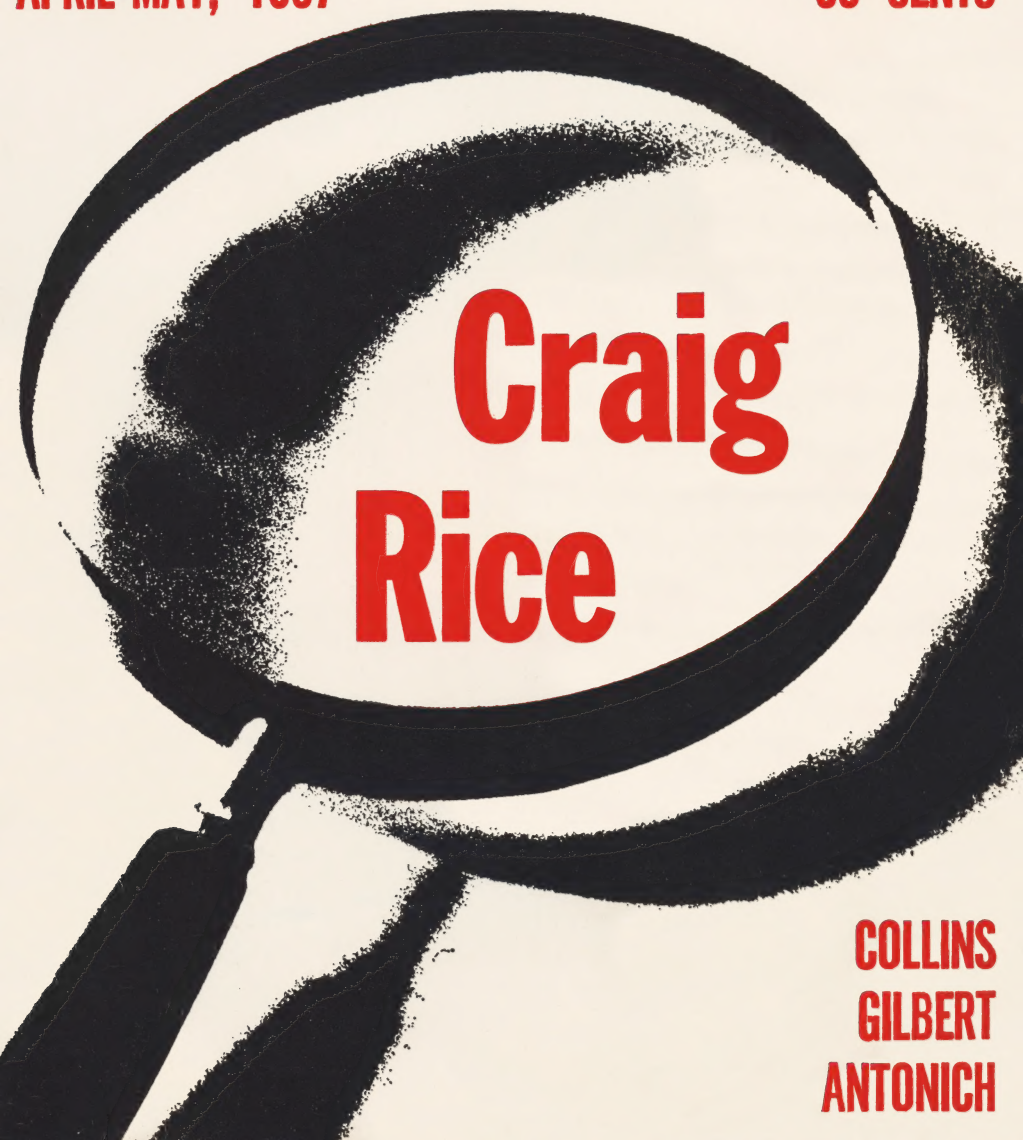

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see back cover

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Nick needed a body-guard . . . so he called on Lew Archer. It seemed simple enough until you realized there wasn't a soul around who wasn't better off with Nick dead.

BAD BLOOD

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A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY JOHN ROSS MACDONALD

A MAN was waiting for me at the gate at the edge of the runway. He didn't look like the man I expected to meet. He wore a stained tan windbreaker, baggy slacks, a hat as squashed and dubious as his face. He must have been forty years old, to judge by the grey in his hair and the lines around his eyes. His eyes were dark and evasive, moving here and there as if to avoid getting hurt. He had been hurt often and badly, I guessed.

"You Archer?"

I said I was. I offered him my hand. He didn't know what to do with it. He regarded it suspiciously, as if I was planning to try a Judo hold on him. He kept his hands in the pockets of his windbreaker.

"I'm Harry Nemo." His voice was a grudging whine. It cost him an effort to give his name away.

"My brother told me to come and pick you up. You ready to go?"

"As soon as I get my luggage."

I collected my overnight bag at the counter in the empty waiting room. The bag was very heavy for its size. It contained, besides a toothbrush and spare linen, two guns and the ammunition for them. A .38 special for sudden work, and a .32 automatic as a spare.

Harry Nemo took me outside to his car. It was a new seven-passenger custom job, as long and black as death. The windshield and side windows were very thick, and they had the yellowish tinge of bullet-proof glass.

"Are you expecting to be shot?"

"Not me." His smile was dismal. "This is Nick's car."

"Why didn't Nick come himself?"

He looked around the deserted field. The plane I had arrived on was a flashing speck in the sky above the red sun. The only human being in sight was the operator in the control tower. But Nemo leaned towards me in the seat, and spoke in a whisper.

"Nick's a scared pigeon. He's scared to leave the house. Ever since this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"Didn't he tell you? You talked to him on the phone."

"He didn't say very much. He told me he wanted to hire a bodyguard for six days, until his boat sails. He didn't tell me why."

"They're gunning for him, that's why. He went to the beach this morning. He has a private beach along the back of his ranch, and he went down there by himself for his morning dip. Somebody took a shot at him from the top of the bluff. Five or six shots. He was in the water, see, with no gun handy. He told me the slugs were splashing around him like hailstones. He ducked and swam under water out to sea. Lucky for him he's a good swimmer, or he wouldn't of got away. It's no wonder he's scared. It means they caught up with him, see."

"Who are 'they', or is that a family secret?"

Nemo turned from the wheel to peer into my face. His breath was sour, his look incredulous. "Christ, don't you know who Nick is? Didn't he tell you?"

"He's a lemon-grower, isn't he?"

"He is now."

"What did he used to be?"

The bitter beaten face closed on itself. "I oughtn't to be flapping at the mouth. He can tell you himself if he wants to."

Two hundred horses yanked us away from the curb. I rode with my heavy leather bag on my knees. Nemo drove as if driving was the one thing in life he enjoyed, rapt in silent communion with the engine. It whisked us along the highway, then down a gradual incline between geometrically planted lemon groves. The sunset sea glimmered red at the foot of the slope.

Before we reached it, we turned off the blacktop into a private lane which ran like a straight hair-parting between the dark green trees. Straight for half-a-mile or more to a low house in a clearing.

The house was flat-roofed, made of concrete and fieldstone, with an attached garage. All of its windows were blinded with heavy drapes. It was surrounded with well-kept shrubbery and lawn, the lawn with ten-foot wire fence surmounted by barbed wire.

Nemo stopped in front of the closed and padlocked gate, and honked the horn. There was no response. He honked the horn again.

About halfway between the house and the gate, a crawling thing came out of the shrubbery. It was a man, moving very slowly on hands and knees. His head hung down almost to the ground. One side of his head was bright red, as if he had fallen in paint. He left a jagged red trail in the gravel of the driveway.

Harry Nemo said, "Nick!" He scrambled out of the car. "What happened, Nick?"

The crawling man lifted his heavy head and looked at us. Cumbrously, he rose to his feet. He came forward with his legs spraddled and loose like a huge infant learning to walk. He breathed loudly and horribly, looking at us with a dreadful hopefulness. Then died on his feet, still walking. I saw the change in his face before it struck the gravel.

Harry Nemo went over the fence like a weary monkey, snagging his slacks on the barbed wire. He knelt beside his brother and turned him over and palmed his chest. He stood up shaking his head.

I had my bag unzipped and my hand on the revolver. I went to the gate. "Open up, Harry."

Harry was saying, "They got him," over and over. He crossed himself several times. "The dirty bastards."

"Open up," I said.

He found a keyring in the dead man's pocket and opened the padlocked gate. Our dragging footsteps crunched the gravel. I looked down at the specks of gravel in Nicky Nemo's eyes, the bullet-hole in his temple.

"Who got him, Harry?"

"I dunno. Fats Jordan, or Artie Castola, or Faronese. It must have been one of them."

"The Purple Gang."

"You called it. Nicky was their treasurer back in the thirties. He was the one that didn't get into the papers. He handled the payoff, see. When the heat went on and the gang got busted up, he had some money in a safe deposit box. He was the only one that got away."

"How much money?"

"Nicky never told me. All I know, he come out here before the war and bought a thousand acres of lemon land. It took them fifteen years to catch up with him. He always knew they would."

"Artie Castola got off the Rock last Spring."

"You're telling me. That's when Nicky bought himself the bullet-proof car and put up the fence."

"Are they gunning for you?"

He looked around at the darkening groves and the sky. The sky was streaked with running red, as if the sun had died a violent death.

"I dunno," he answered nervously. "They got no reason to. I'm as clean as soap. I never been in the rackets. Not since I was young, anyway. The wife made me go straight, see?"

I said: "We better get into the house and call the police."

The front door was standing a few inches ajar. I could see at the edge that it was sheathed with quarter-inch steel plate. Harry put my thoughts into words:

"Why in hell would he go outside? He was safe as houses as long as he stayed inside."

"Did he live alone?"

"More or less alone."

"What does that mean?"

He pretended not to hear me, but I got some kind of an answer. Looking through the doorless arch into the living room, I saw a leopard-skin coat folded across the back of the chesterfield. There were red-tipped cigarette butts mingled with cigar butts in the ashtrays.

"Nicky was married?"

"Not exactly."

"You know the woman?"

"Naw." But he was lying.

Somewhere behind the thick walls of the house, there was a creak of springs, a crashing bump, the broken roar of a cold engine, grinding of tires in gravel. I got to the door in time to see a cerise convertible hurtling down the driveway. The top was down, and a yellow-haired girl was small and intent at the wheel. She swerved around Nick's body and got through the gate somehow, with her tires screaming. I aimed at the right rear tire, and missed. Harry came up behind me. He pushed my gun-arm down before I could fire again. The convertible disappeared in the direction of the highway

"Let her go," he said.

"Who is she?"

He thought about it, his slow brain clicking almost audibly. "I dunno. Some pig that Nicky picked up some place. Her name is Flossie or Florrie or something. She didn't shoot him, if that's what you're worried about."

"You know her pretty well, do you?"

"The hell I do. I don't mess with Nicky's dames." He tried to work up a rage to go with the strong words, but he didn't have the makings. The best he could produce was petulance: "Listen, mister, why should you hang around? The guy that hired you is dead."

"I haven't been paid, for one thing."

"I'll fix that."

He trotted across the lawn to the

body and came back with an alligator billfold. It was thick with money.

"How much?"

"A hundred will do it."

He handed me a hundred-dollar bill. "Now how about you amscray, bud, before the law gets here?"

"I need transportation."

"Take Nicky's car. He won't be using it. You can park it at the airport and leave the key with the agent."

"I can, eh?"

"Sure. I'm telling you you can."

"Aren't you getting a little free with your brother's property?"

"It's my property now, bud." A bright thought struck him, disorganizing his face. "Incidentally, how would you like to get off of my land?"

"I'm staying, Harry, I like this place. I always say it's people that make a place."

The gun was still in my hand. He looked down at it.

"Get on the telephone, Harry. Call the police."

"Who do you think you are, ordering me around? I took my last order from anybody, see?" He glanced over his shoulder at the dark and shapeless object on the gravel, and spat venomously.

"I'm a citizen, working for Nicky. Not for you."

He changed his tune very suddenly. "How much to go to work for me?"

"Depends on the line of work."

He manipulated the alligator wallet. "Here's another hundred. If you got to hang around, keep the lip buttoned down about the dame, eh? Is it a deal?"

I didn't answer, but I took the money. I put it in a separate pocket by itself. Harry telephoned the county sheriff.

He emptied the ashtrays before the sheriff's men arrived, and stuffed the leopardskin coat into the woodbox. I sat and watched him.

We spent the next two hours with loud-mouthed deputies. They were angry with the dead man for having the kind of past that attracted bullets. They were angry with Harry for being his brother. They were secretly angry with themselves for being inexperienced and incompetent. They didn't even uncover the leopardskin coat.

Harry Nemo left the courthouse first. I waited for him to leave, and tailed him home, on foot.

Where a leaning palm-tree reared its ragged head above the pavements, there was a court lined with jerry-built frame cottages. Harry turned up the walk between them and entered the first cottage. Light flashed on his face from inside. I heard a woman's voice say something to him. Then light and sound were cut off by the closing door.

An old gabled house with boarded-up windows stood opposite the court. I crossed the street and set-

tled down in the shadows of its verandah to watch Harry Nemo's cottage. Three cigarettes later, a tall woman in a dark hat and a light coat came out of the cottage and walked briskly to the corner and out of sight. Two cigarettes after that, she reappeared at the corner on my side of the street, still walking briskly. I noticed that she had a large straw handbag under her arm. Her face was long and stony under the streetlight.

Leaving the street, she marched up the broken sidewalk to the verandah where I was leaning against the shadowed wall. The stairs groaned under her decisive footsteps. I put my hand on the gun in my pocket, and waited. With the rigid assurance of a WAC corporal marching at the head of her platoon, she crossed the verandah to me, a thin high-shouldered silhouette against the light from the corner. Her hand was in her straw bag, and the end of the bag was pointed at my stomach. Her shadowed face was a gleam of eyes, a glint of teeth.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," she said. "I have a gun here, and the safety is off, and I know how to shoot it, mister."

"Good for you."

"I'm not joking." Her deep contralto rose a notch. "Rapid fire used to be my specialty. So you better take your hands out of your pockets."

I showed her my hands, empty. Moving very quickly, she relieved my pocket of the weight of my gun, and frisked me for other weapons.

"Who are you, mister?" she said as she stepped back. "You can't be Arturo Castola, you're not old enough."

"Are you a policewoman?"

"I'll ask the questions. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for a friend."

"You're a liar. You've been watching my house for an hour and a half. I tabbed you through the window."

"So you went and bought yourself a gun?"

"I did. You followed Harry home. I'm Mrs. Nemo, and I want to know why."

"Harry's the friend I'm waiting for."

"You're a double liar. Harry's afraid of you. You're no friend of his."

"That depends on Harry. I'm a detective."

She snorted. "Very likely. Where's your buzzer?"

"I'm a private detective," I said. "I have identification in my wallet."

"Show me. And don't try any tricks."

I produced my photostat. She held it up to the light. "So you're a detective. You better do something about your tailing technique. It's obvious.'"

"I didn't know I was dealing with a cop."

"I was a cop," she said. "Not any more."

"Then give me back my .38. It cost me seventy dollars."

"First tell me, what's your interest in my husband? Who hired you?"

"Nick, your brother-in-law. He called me in Los Angeles today, said he needed a bodyguard for a week. Didn't Harry tell you?"

She didn't answer.

"By the time I got to Nick, he didn't need a bodyguard, or anything. But I thought I'd stick around and see what I could find out about his death. He was a client, after all."

"You should pick your clients more carefully."

"What about picking brothers-in-law?"

She shook her head stiffly. The hair that escaped from under her hat was almost white. "I'm not responsible for Nick or anything about him. Harry is my responsibility. I met him in line of duty and I straightened him out, understand? I tore him loose from Detroit and the rackets, and I brought him out here. I couldn't cut him off from his brother entirely. But he hasn't been in trouble since I married him. Not once."

"Until now."

"Harry isn't in trouble now."

"Not yet. Not officially."

"What do you mean?"

"Give me my gun, and put yours down. I can't talk into iron."

She hesitated, a grim and anxious woman under pressure. I wondered what quirk of fate or psychology had married her to a hood, and decided it must have been love. Only love would send a woman across a dark street to face down an unknown gunman. Mrs. Nemo was horsefaced and aging and not pretty, but she had courage.

She handed me my gun. Its butt was soothing to the palm of my hand. I dropped it into my pocket. A gang of Negro boys at loose ends went by in the street, hooting and whistling purposelessly.

She leaned towards me, almost as tall as I was. Her voice was a low sibilance forced between her teeth:

"Harry had nothing to do with his brother's death. You're crazy if you think so."

"What makes you so sure, Mrs. Nemo?"

"Harry couldn't, that's all. I know Harry, I can read him like a book. Even if he had the guts, which he hasn't, he wouldn't dare to think of killing Nick. Nick was his older brother, understand, the successful one in the family." Her voice rasped contemptuously. "In spite of everything I could do or say, Harry worshipped Nick right up to the end."

"Those brotherly feelings sometimes cut two ways. And Harry had a lot to gain."

"Not a cent. Nothing."

"He's Nick's heir, isn't he?"

"Not as long as he stays married to me. I wouldn't let him touch a

cent of Nick Nemo's filthy money. Is that clear?"

"It's clear to me. But is it clear to Harry?"

"I made it clear to him, many times. Anyway, this is ridiculous. Harry wouldn't lay a finger on that precious brother of his."

"Maybe he didn't do it himself. He could have had it done for him. I know he's covering for somebody."

"Who?"

"A blonde girl left the house after we arrived. She got away in a cherry-colored convertible. Harry recognized her."

"A cherry-colored convertible?"

"Yes. Does that mean something to you?"

"No, nothing in particular. She must have been one of Nick's girls. He always had girls."

"Why would Harry cover for her?"

"What do you mean, cover for her?"

"She left a leopardskin coat behind. Harry hid it, and paid me not to tell the police."

"Harry did that?"

"Unless I'm having delusions."

"Maybe you are at that. If you think that Harry paid that girl to shoot Nick, or had anything—"

"I know. Don't say it. I'm crazy."

Mrs. Nemo laid a thin hand on my arm. "Anyway, lay off Harry. Please. I have a hard enough time handling him as it is. He's worse than my first husband. The first one was a drunk, believe it or not." She glanced at the lighted cottage across the street, and I saw one half of her bitter smile. "I wonder what makes a woman go for the lame ducks the way I did."

"I wouldn't know, Mrs. Nemo. Okay. I lay off Harry."

But I had no intention of laying off Harry. When she went back to her cottage, I walked around three-quarters of the block and took up a new position in the doorway of a dry-cleaning establishment. This time I didn't smoke. I didn't even move, except to look at my watch from time to time.

Around eleven o'clock, the lights went out behind the blinds in the Nemo cottage. Shortly before midnight the front door opened and Harry slipped out. He looked up and down the street and began to walk. He passed within six feet of my dark doorway, hustling along in a kind of furtive shuffle.

Working very cautiously, at a distance, I tailed him downtown. He disappeared into the lighted cavern of an all-night garage. He came out of the garage a few minutes later, driving a prewar Chevrolet.

My money also talked to the attendant. I drew a prewar Buick which would still do seventy-five. I proved that it would, as soon as I hit the highway. I reached the entrance to Nick Nemo's private lane in time to see Harry's lights approaching the dark ranch-house.

I cut my lights and parked at the

roadside a hundred yards below the entrance to the lane, and facing it. The Chevrolet reappeared in a few minutes. Harry was still alone in the front seat. I followed it blind as far as the highway before I risked my lights. Then down the highway to the edge of town.

In the middle of the motel and drive-in district he turned off onto a side road and in under a neon sign which spelled out TRAILER COURT across the darkness. The trailers stood along the bank of a dry creek. The Chevrolet stopped in front of one of them, which had a light in the window. Harry got out with a spotted bundle under his arm. He knocked on the door of the trailer.

I U-turned at the next corner and put in more waiting time. The Chevrolet rolled out under the neon sign and turned towards the highway. I let it go.

Leaving my car, I walked along the creek bank to the lighted trailer. The windows were curtained. The cerise convertible was parked on its far side. I tapped on the aluminum door.

"Harry?" a girl's voice said. "Is that you, Harry?"

I muttered something indistinguishable. The door opened, and the yellow-haired girl looked out. She was very young, but her round blue eyes were heavy and sick with hangover, or remorse. She had on a nylon slip, nothing else.

"What is this?"

She tried to shut the door. I held it open.

"Get away from here. Leave me alone. I'll scream."

"All right. Scream."

She opened her mouth. No sound came out. She closed her mouth again. It was small and fleshy and defiant. "Who are you? Law?"

"Close enough. I'm coming in."

"Come in then, damn you. I got nothing to hide."

"I can see that."

I brushed in past her. There were dead Martinis on her breath. The little room was a jumble of feminine clothes, silk and cashmere and tweed and gossamer nylon, some of them flung on the floor, others hung up to dry. The leopardskin coat lay on the bunk bed, staring with innumerable bold eyes. She picked it up and covered her shoulders with it. Unconsciously, her nervous hands began to pick the wood-chips out of the fur. I said:

"Harry did you a favor, didn't he?"

"Maybe he did."

"Have you been doing any favors for Harry?"

"Such as?"

"Such as knocking off his brother."

"You're way off the beam, mister. I was very fond of Uncle Nick."

"Why run out on the killing then?"

"I panicked," she said. "It could happen to any girl. I was asleep when he got it, see, passed out if

you want the truth. I heard the gun go off. It woke me up, but it took me quite a while to bring myself to and sober up enough to put my clothes on. By the time I made it to the bedroom window, Harry was back, with some guy." She peered into my face. "Were you the guy?"

I nodded.

"I thought so. I thought you were law at the time. I saw Nick lying there in the driveway, all bloody, and I put two and two together and got trouble. Bad trouble for me, unless I got out. So I got out. It wasn't nice to do, after what Nick meant to me, but it was the only sensible thing. I got my career to think of."

"What career is that?"

"Modeling. Acting. Uncle Nick was gonna send me to school."

"Unless you talk, you'll finish your education at Tehachapi. Who shot Nick?"

A thin edge of terror entered her voice. "I don't know, I tell you. I was passed out in the bedroom. I didn't see nothing."

"Why did Harry bring you your coat?"

"He didn't want me to get involved. He's my father, after all."

"Harry Nemo is your father?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to do better than that. What's your name?"

"Jeannine. Jeannine Larue."

"Why isn't your name Nemo if Harry is your father? Why do you call him Harry?"

"He's my stepfather, I mean."

"Sure," I said. "And Nick was really your uncle, and you were having a family reunion with him."

"He wasn't any blood relation to me. I always called him uncle, though."

"If Harry's your father, why don't you live with him?"

"I used to. Honest. This is the truth I'm telling you. I had to get out on account of the old lady. The old lady hates my guts. She's a real creep, a square. She can't stand for a girl to have any fun. Just because my old man was a rummy—"

"What's your idea of fun, Jeannine?"

She shook her feathercut hair at me. It exhaled a heavy perfume which was worth its weight in blood. She bared one pearly shoulder and smiled an artificial hustler's smile. "What's yours? Maybe we can get together."

"You mean the way you got together with Nick?"

"You're prettier than him."

"I'm also smarter. I hope. Is Harry really your stepfather?"

"Ask him if you don't believe me. Ask him. He lives in a place on Tule Street—I don't remember the number."

"I know where he lives."

But Harry wasn't at home. I knocked on the door of the frame cottage and got no answer. I turned the knob, and found that the door was unlocked. There was a light behind it. The other cottages in the court were dark. It was long past

midnight, and the street was deserted. I went into the cottage, preceded by my gun.

A ceiling bulb glared down on sparse and threadbare furniture, a time-eaten rug. Besides the living-room, the house contained a cubby-hole of a bedroom and a closet kitchenette. Everything in the poverty-stricken place was pathetically clean. There were moral mottoes on the walls, and one picture. It was a photograph of a tow-headed girl in a teen-age party dress. Jeannine, before she learned that a pretty face and a sleek body could buy her the things she wanted. The things she thought she wanted.

For some reason, I felt sick. I went outside. Somewhere out of sight, an old car-engine muttered. Its muttering grew on the night. Harry Nemo's rented Chevrolet turned the corner under the street-light. Its front wheels were weaving. One of the wheels climbed the curb in front of the cottage. The Chevrolet came to a halt at a drunken angle.

I crossed the sidewalk and opened the car door. Harry was at the wheel, clinging to it desperately as if he needed it to hold him up. His chest was bloody. His mouth was bright with blood. He spoke through it thickly:

"She got me."

"Who got you, Harry? Jeannine?"

His mouth grinned, ghastly red like a clown's. "No. Not her. She was the reason for it, though. We had it coming."

Those were his final words. I caught his body as it fell sideways out of the seat. Laid it out on the sidewalk and left it for the cop on the beat to find.

I drove across town to the trailer court. Jeannine's trailer still had light in it, filtered through the curtains over the windows. I pushed the door open.

The girl was packing a suitcase on the bunk bed. She looked at me over her shoulder, and froze. Her blonde head was cocked like a frightened bird's, hypnotized by my gun.

"Where are you off to, kid?"

"Out of this town. I'm getting out."

"You have some talking to do first."

She straightened up. "I told you all I know. You didn't believe me. What's the matter, didn't you get to see Harry?"

"I saw him. Harry's dead. Your whole family is dying like flies."

She half-turned and sat down limply on the disordered bed. "Dead? You think I did it?"

"I think you know who did. Harry said before he died that you were the reason for it all."

"Me the reason for it?" Her eyes widened in false naivete, but there was thought behind them, quick and desperate thought. "You mean that Harry got killed on account of me?"

"Harry and Nick both. It was a woman who shot them."

"God," she said. The desperate thought behind her eyes crystallized into knowledge. Which I shared.

The aching silence was broken by a big diesel rolling by on the highway. She said above its roar:

"That crazy old bat. So *she* killed Nick."

"You're talking about your mother. Mrs. Nemo."

"Yeah."

"Did you see her shoot him?"

"No, I was blotto like I told you. But I saw her out there this week, keeping an eye on the house. She's always watched me like a hawk."

"Is that why you were getting out of town? Because you knew she killed Nick?"

"Maybe it was. I don't know. I wouldn't let myself think about it."

Her blue gaze shifted from my face to something behind me. I turned. Mrs. Nemo was in the doorway. She was hugging the straw bag to her thin chest.

Her right hand dove into the bag. I shot her in the right arm. She leaned against the door-frame and held her dangling arm with her left hand. Her face was granite in whose crevices her eyes were like live things caught.

The gun she dropped was a cheap .32 revolver, its nickel plating worn and corroded. I spun the cylinder. One shot had been fired from it.

"This accounts for Harry," I said. "You didn't shoot Nick with this gun, not at that distance."

"No." She was looking down at her dripping hand. "I used my old police gun on Nick Nemo. After I killed him, I threw the gun into the sea. I didn't know I'd have further use for a gun. I bought that little suicide gun tonight."

"To use on Harry?"

"To use on you. I thought you were on to me. I didn't know until you told me that Harry knew about Nick and Jeannine."

"Jeannine is your daughter by your first husband?"

"My only daughter." She said to the girl: "I did it for you, Jeannine. I've seen too much—the awful things that can happen."

The girl didn't answer. I said:

"I can understand why you shot Nick. But why Harry?"

"Nick paid him," she said. "Nick paid him for Jeannine. I found Harry in a bar an hour ago, and he admitted it. I hope I killed him."

"You killed him, Mrs. Nemo. What brought you here? Was Jeannine the third on your list?"

"No. No. She's my own girl. I came to tell her what I did for her. I wanted her to know."

She looked at the girl on the bed. Her eyes were terrible with pain and love. The girl said in a stunned voice:

"Mother. You're hurt. I'm sorry."

"Let's go, Mrs. Nemo," I said.

MANHUNT'S

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A GOOD MAN . . . IS HARD TO FIND

BY LAWRENCE E. ORIN

Lord knows, she had her cross to bear. Imagine . . . him out there in the night burying that good-for-nothing dog. He was such an impractical man.

MARTHA NEALY stood by the sink, a damp, checkered towel in her dishwater-reddened hands, listening to the rhythmic *thud-thud* of Abner's pick striking the ground as he loosened the hard soil for the grave. Only one other sound broke the silence in the little, old-fashioned kitchen: A cheap alarm clock noisily ticking away the minutes from its perch on a shelf over a shiny-black, nickle-trimmed cookstove. Now its hands stretched to six o'clock.

Spreading her cloth over a rack to dry, Martha crossed to a rear window. The glass was quite opaque, steamy from condensed moisture in the warm room. She started to pull the shade, then remembered she'd better check on her husband's progress. Wiping a corner of the pane with her gingham apron, she peered out into the barnyard.

Outside, the brief twilight had surrendered to the deep gloom of a late-autumn night, and Abner had lighted his Coleman lantern. Hissing gently in the cool air, it sat on the ground near where he worked. A dozen yards beyond, against the backdrop of the barn's blank wall, the toiling man's shadow, like a huge, black giant, aped his every movement. A few feet to his left, still and quiet, lay Mortimer's body.

For a fleeting moment, Martha felt a twinge of sympathy for her husband. She really hadn't meant to kill the dog. It was true enough

she'd never wanted to have it around, not from that first day, four years ago, when Abner had brought the animal home with him. As far as Martha was concerned, every living creature on their efficient, tightly-run, little farm had to pull its own weight. But Mortimer, as Abner had named the clumsy, big-footed, playful pup, was good for nothing but to chase the cows, frighten the chickens, and harass the cats, who, although themselves sometimes a nuisance, at least kept the place relatively rat-free.

Even as he grew older, it was very seldom Mortimer strayed far from Abner's heels. But this morning he'd been skylarking out in the fields when his master had warmed up their old Ford pick-up to take a load of produce to town. Abner had stalled and puttered, waiting for Mortimer to show up, but finally his wife had prodded him enough to get him started on his way. Honestly! Sometimes she didn't know which of the two, the man or the dog, was the more irresponsible.

It had been nine o'clock before Mortimer had returned from his jaunt. Frantically, he'd dashed about, searching for Abner. Martha was just leaving the henhouse, a half-dozen fresh-laid eggs cradled in the folds of her apron, when Mortimer had barged through the door. He'd scooted between her legs, tripping her to the ground. Infuriated at the loss of the eggs, and at the messy conglomeration in her lap, she'd grabbed a shovel Abner sometimes used to clean the floor. She must have struck a harder blow than she'd intended, for Mortimer hadn't even yelped. He'd just fallen, a shapeless, furry heap at her feet.

Martha drew the blind and frowned in annoyance. Her husband had no business to be out there digging in the hard, rock-infested ground when he should be getting his rest for tomorrow's work. She'd tried to convince him to wait until morning, then just take the dog's body over to the county dump. But honestly! He *could* be stubborn on occasion. Not often, but sometimes. Well, she supposed, if he wanted to be a sentimental old fool, that was up to him.

Leaving the kitchen door unlocked, Martha snapped off the light and made her way down the hall and up the stairs. Near the top landing one of the steps creaked beneath her slight weight. Again she frowned. How many times had she asked Abner to repair that tread? Honestly! That man was getting to be more of a procrastinator every day. Well, she'd just have to get after him again tomorrow.

In her bedroom, Martha turned on the silk-shaded lamp that sat on her dresser. She stood a moment contemplating her reflection in the mirror, and she wasn't pleased with what she saw. It didn't seem possi-

ble this grim-faced, gray-haired woman could once have been the pretty, teen-aged bride Abner had carried across the threshold of this very house so long ago. Those thirty-five years of work and worry had certainly taken their toll.

Sometimes she wished she'd listened to her mother's advice and accepted old Timothy Barstow when he'd proposed. But no, she'd had to play hard to get, and Timothy hadn't had time to play the waiting game. Only a few weeks after she'd turned him down, he'd married Alice Patterson, one of Martha's former schoolmates. Then, less than five years later, he'd died, and Alice had found herself a wealthy widow.

Martha heaved a martyr's sigh, and pulled open a drawer and took out her darning. Honestly! She didn't see how Abner could wear out his socks so fast. Not that she minded the mending; in fact if she didn't check on him constantly he'd throw his holey socks away, just as if money to buy new ones grew on bushes. How her husband would ever have gotten along without her to keep a tight rein on his spending, she didn't know.

Oh, it was true they'd never been hungry or wanted for warm clothes on their backs. The mortgaged farm Abner's father had left them was now free and clear. And their nest egg in the local bank amounted to a tidy sum. But Abner could hardly take any credit for this modest state of prosperity. Why, as recently as a couple of years ago he'd wanted to draw out a sizable portion of their hard-earned savings and go traipsing off to Hawaii, or some other outlandish place, for a vacation. Honestly! Sometimes he was most impractical; like tonight, for instance—out there in the cold digging a grave for a worthless dog.

Except for the muffled sounds of Abner's shoveling and the soothing music on Martha's little radio, her room was quiet. She worked diligently, recalling as she stitched how it had been when she and Abner were first married. Then too, she'd had to scold him for being so easygoing. But he'd just laughed, and called her his little slave driver. Later, when the honeymoon had ended, they'd begun to quarrel in earnest, but she'd held her ground and insisted they keep their noses to the proverbial grindstone. Finally, he'd given in, and only occasionally did he become obstinate about something—as, for instance, the matter concerning keeping that no-good Mortimer.

No, Abner didn't give her many reasons to wrangle with him nowadays. Even this evening, when she'd told him about the accident to Mortimer, he didn't appear angry. He'd only looked at her as though he doubted her story about the broken eggs. Well, let him think what he pleased. He'd get used to not having the dog around soon, and she resolved to see to it that he

didn't bring home another useless pet to squander his time on.

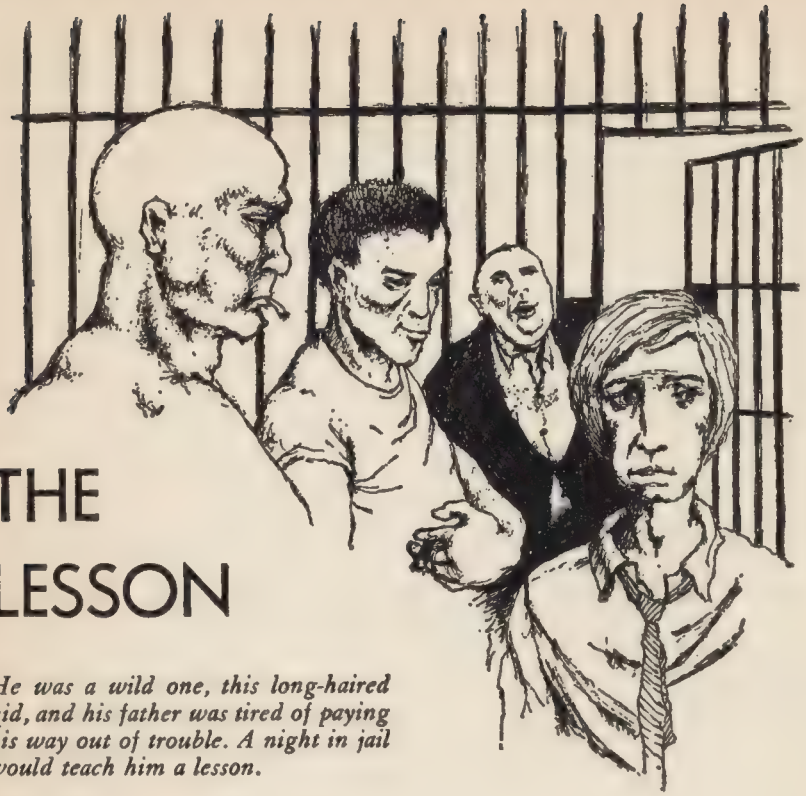
The announcer on the radio told her it was nine o'clock. It was time she was getting to bed. She'd wager the "Widow Barstow" wasn't retiring this early, just so she could get up at an ungodly hour to make sure the chores got done. But then, her friend Alice hadn't married a lazy, daydreaming farmer.

After putting her work away, it took Martha but a few minutes to slip out of her clothes and don a long, warm, flannel nightgown. She'd turned off the light, shut off the radio, and was about to crawl into her bed, when she noticed she could no longer hear Abner working. Well, it was about time. Already he'd wasted over three hours out there. And for what? Just because he wanted his precious Mortimer buried nearby.

She went to the window and lifted the shade. Strange! The lantern was still there, burning a bright hole in the dark night, but Abner was nowhere in sight. And that hole he'd dug—it was twice the size needed for the dog's body. No wonder he'd been so long.

But, on second thought, that wasn't like her husband at all. He wasn't *that* fond of hard work. Then, suddenly, she felt a draft on the back of her neck as the bedroom door opened. She turned to see Abner's bulky form filling the opening. Her mouth fell open in surprise.

The icy fingers that now trickled up and down Martha's spine came from no draft of cold air. She knew they belonged to the clammy hands of death when she saw the shovel her husband had brought upstairs with him, and when she realized the awful significance of the oversized grave.



THE LESSON

He was a wild one, this long-haired kid, and his father was tired of paying his way out of trouble. A night in jail would teach him a lesson.

BY GENE WILSON

His face flushed with anger, Jason Morrow clutched the telephone in a white knuckled grip that revealed the intensity of his struggle for self control. Behind him, his wife fluttered nervously, trying to hear the conversation. Beneath her makeup she was pale, and the brightness of tears was in her eyes.

"Whaddya mean, you're sorry?" he sputtered into the phone. "You knew the goddam car was stolen when you got into it." He listened to the reply, jaw still pulsing. "Quit crying, dammit!" he snapped.

"Jason, honey," his wife tried, touching him. He shrugged her away. "Listen, Paul," he said, "You

want us to come down and get you out of it, huh? Well, you're mother and me didn't get you in it. I might be down tomorrow to get you, but tonight you're gonna learn to be a man. I've been paying your bills all your life. Maybe you'll start appreciating all we've done for you after a night there. Who the hell do you think you are stealing somebody's car?" He listened again, though blinded by his own anger. "No, dammit! And quit that caterwauling. You're lucky you're where I can't get my hands on you." Jason hung up, and, still puffing swollenly, turned to his wife. "I don't want any arguments out of you, either," he said to her before she could speak. "He's got to learn something sometime, and maybe a night in jail will teach him."

* * *

Paul Morrow put the pay telephone on the hook and looked hesitantly around at the madness of the booking office bullpen. There were thirty or more bodies in the airless, sweltering room, and others were brought in at irregular intervals, scooped from the streets of the city, to await their booking. Every twenty minutes a burly deputy, his shirt darkened at the armpits with sweat, came in another door and bellowed a few names from a list. Often a name did not reply, for half the melee was winos, and many of these, in their rags, lay unconscious or trembling in the mess of mashed out cigarette butts on the floor.

There were two new prisoners who were clean shaven and decently dressed. They stood aloof and calm. Paul heard one of them say he had just gotten out of prison. There was a redhead in white painter's overalls, splattered with blood. He rocked back and forth, talking to himself. A group of negroes, in stingy brim beaver hats and long pointed shoes, were clustered together in one corner, phony diamond rings flashing from their fingers. They had been picked up for gambling, and were awaiting the bail bondsman.

Hours ago, when he and Sonny and LeRoy were brought from the outlying police station, Paul had not been afraid. He had even managed to joke a little. Now, though, he was alone. Sonny and LeRoy had left with their parents. Paul had lost count of how many times he had dialed the number of their telephone at home, always with the same lack of success. Now, after his father had hung up, Paul felt resentment at being the only one left to spend the night in jail.

The deputies had been holding back his booking, not through solicitude, but to ease their own burden of work. If the parents were coming, there was no need going through the procedure, and then releasing him.

The burly deputy entered again, and Paul told him that his parents were not coming. The deputy shrugged. "Too bad," he said, and turned away.

Ten minutes later, his name was bellowed, along with half a dozen others. In another room he stood before a purple negress with flying fingers that were a blur across a typewriter; name, age, weight, address, aliases; a brief, routine history that was recorded before he finished uttering it.

On the other side of the room, his fingerprints were rolled onto several form cards, recording the whorls for history, and smudging more than his fingertips.

Under harsh, burning lights, a small sign with numbers was hung from his neck, and photographs were taken. The processing was impersonal, and the people who did it, so expressionless, that Paul felt they were not humans, but machines in a factory of which he was merely a product.

As he obeyed the impersonal orders; go there, stand here; he felt a growing and terrible loneliness. Remorse and self-pity welled up from churning stomach to sting his eyes. The whole of it gathered into a single, silent cry, "I want to go home!" and one that he was barely able to hold back. If one of the blank-faced automatons had showed the tiniest glance of interest, he would have sobbed it out in a repetitious chant.

They did not.

The batch of new prisoners finished being booked. Another deputy herded them through a steel door into the maze of the jail. They went down corridors that on one side were blank walls, and on the other were endless bars of tanks. Beyond the bars were walkways and barred cells, now with their gates open. Prisoners stared out at the column of new arrivals.

Paul stumbled along, following the man in front of him. He was conscious of the gloom, the stench of bodies and antiseptic; and, especially, of the eyes watching from behind the rows of bars.

They went down several of these passages, turning at sharp angles, to the right, to the left. It was a world without windows, and what light there was came from widely spaced bulbs. Paul's mind rang from the constant hum of sound, like a cloud of insects, and he finally realized that it was the combining of countless voices in the tanks, echoing down the passages.

At a storeroom, they were each given a bedroll, clean blankets, and a dirty mattress—the latter, stained with the sweat of a thousand naked bodies.

They retraced their journey down the passages, the rolled bedding on their shoulders. The filthy mattress was against the boy's cheek, its stench adding nausea to loneliness and exhaustion. The new arrivals were sent to various tanks, and the group lessened in number.

Paul was next to last. The deputy called his name, and when he stepped forward, looked him over. "They're sticking you in a felony tank. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"What's your charge?"

"I think it's car theft."

"You know damn well what it is!" The deputy grunted, and shrugged. He banged on a barred gate with a giant key. "Fish on the line," he called inside.

Paul stepped through the unlocked gate, and it crashed shut behing him. He was in the cage. The tank was twenty yards long. On the right were the faces of the cells; on the left, the bars. Between the cells and the outer bars there was a walkway about six feet wide. Two card games were in progress on blankets on the floor of the walk near the front of the tank. Further down, prisoners sat against the bars, or paced the confined area. They were crowded, and they seemed dirty. Some wore T-shirts, yellowed and time grayed; others wore no upper garment, and one had on only BVd's. Most had the pallor of being many weeks without sunlight, and almost all were in need of a shave.

There was something almost animal like about them. One of the card players nudged another and made a comment that brought turned heads and grins. Paul knew he was the subject of their comments. Self-consciously, his right shoulder beginning to ache from the strain of holding the bedroll, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The grins widened, as he stood indecisively, wondering where he was supposed to go; the half formed words of inquiry somehow sticking in his throat.

From the first cell, which had a solid door and plywood panelling over the bars to make it a room, a man emerged. Shirtless, the wide expanse of bare chest was covered with a mat of tightly curled black hair. Clenched in his teeth was the stub of an unlighted cigar, and in one hand was the stub of a pencil. In the other hand, he had a clipboard with a list attached. He looked at the youth with a direct and curious gaze. Paul was aware of the eyes noting his long hair, and he blushed involuntarily.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

Paul told him, and watched it being written on the list.

"I'm Masovich. I run things in here." He said it matter of factly, neither apologetically nor condescendingly.

Paul nodded. "Can I put this down?" he asked, jiggling the bedroll.

"Throw it in cell seven. That's where you're living. Ever been in jail before?"

"No."

Masovich didn't say anything. His face was expressionless, except for the hardness that was always there. He looked the slim boy up and down and turned wordlessly away, entering the first cell.

Paul hesitated, and then started down the walkway toward cell seven. He had to pass the card game,

and there was no room, unless he stepped through the middle of it. He stopped.

"C'mon, kid," one of the card players said, clearing the cards from the blanket. The others leaned back.

Paul passed through, tiptoeing.

"Did you get a load of that hairdo?" a voice said behind him.

"I been here six months . . . After that, he looks like Kim Novak to me." There was laughter, but Paul did not turn around. His cheeks were flaming.

Cell seven was crowded. There were two bunks attached to one wall. The upper had a two-handed card game in progress. On the lower, a tall youth was stretched out with a paperback. There was a washbasin and toilet. On the toilet sat a fat man, the few long strands of hair on the top of his scalp combed carefully sideways in an attempt to cover the naked pinkness. His pants were dropped around his ankles, showing fat, hairless legs with blue varicose veins. The occupants of the cell seemed oblivious to the fat man.

Paul stopped in the doorway, thinking that there must have been a mistake. Eyes turned to stare at him.

"Where you supposed to go?" one of the card players asked. The speaker was sallow looking, with an acne-blotched face. Though only a few years older than Paul, a cynical wisdom in his eyes showed the school of hard knocks which had matured him beyond his years.

"He said cell seven," Paul answered.

"Who said?" the other card player asked. He was as pimply faced as the other, with the addition of a bedraggled wisp of mustache and a straggly goatee.

"The guy in the first cell. Marovich, or something. He said he runs things."

"Christ!" the one with the hard eyes said. "There's four of us in here now. How come, when he's got a cell all by himself?"

"Why don't you go tell him about it, Jeronsek?" It was the fat man. He chuckled while he unrolled the toilet paper.

"Yeah, well I might just do that," Jeronsek said.

The other card player, the one with the goatee, broke in, "While you're thinking about it, let's play, huh?"

"I'll go somewhere else," Paul offered timidly.

"You might as well stay here," the fat man said, flushing the toilet. "At least you're not a wino, puking all over the place."

Jeronsek muttered his disgust. Jumping down from the bunk, he went out the cell door.

Paul turned back to the others.

"Where'll I sleep?" he asked.

The stringbean on the lower bunk spoke without looking up from the pocket book he was reading. "On the floor, beneath the bottom bunk . . . under me," he said. "And let's keep it a little quiet, huh?"

Paul lowered the mattress carefully past the reader, and pushed it under the bottom bunk. There were two mattresses in the space already, or he would have spared it out and layed down. He imagined that at night the other mattresses were pulled out, onto the floor in the center of the cell.

The remaining card player had gone to solitaire. The reader was absorbed in his book, and the fat man had slumped back on the toilet. He had his pants on now. Paul wondered what he should do.

"Sit down," the fat man said, pointing to a clear space at the foot of the bottom bunk.

The boy glanced hesitantly at the lanky figure with the paperback propped on his chest, obscuring the face, then lowered himself tentatively onto one corner of the bed.

"What's your beef?" the fat man asked.

"Car theft."

"Joy riding?"

"I guess you'd call it that. We were just cruising around."

"Ever been in jail before?"

Paul shook his head, answering negatively. The other man asked if his family was going to get him a lawyer, and the boy said he didn't know. The fat man went on talking, asking questions and probing, in an inoffensive way.

"You hungry, kid?" he said. Without waiting for an answer, he reached under a corner of the mattress and pulled out a flat package wrapped in waxpaper. As the fat man unwrapped the paper, Paul saw two slices of dry bread. His stomach reminded him that he hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast, and that was over twelve hours ago. Saliva began to flow in his mouth as the other produced a milk carton, cut in half, filled with cold red beans. Hungrily, the boy watched as the fat man spread a thick layer of beans on one slice of bread, then made a sandwich by topping it with the other slice.

Paul had just reached for the sandwich, when the trouble began.

Jeronsek appeared at the cell door, face flushed. "That nut is on the loose again," he announced, shaking his head and looking at Paul with a worried expression, then turning and leaving again.

Paul managed to swallow the mouthful of bread and beans and said, "What's wrong?"

"There's a crazy man in here," the solitaire player on the top bunk answered. Before he could say more, there was an explosion of sound from the walkway outside the cell; struggling grunts, excited voices, and shuffling feet. The men in the cell hurried out, Paul following.

Several of the younger prisoners, Jeronsek among them, were grappling with a bizarre figure. It was a man, with a great wild beard and tangled hair. His eyes had a mad, blank look, and saliva ran from the corners of his mouth.

"I'll get him . . . kill him . . .

kill . . ." the madman raved, while those holding him puffed, "Hold him . . . get an arm . . . Christ, but he's strong!"

The whole tank was watching, a few seeming to take pleasure in the excitement, but most of them just looking silently. Paul stood, frozen into immobility, his skin prickling, and the short hairs on the back of his neck standing up, as he gaped at the insanely contorted face of the violently struggling figure.

Suddenly, the crazy man saw the boy, and lunged toward him, screaming and cursing in rage. Jeronsek and the others who were struggling with him, though half a dozen to one, were dragged forward with the advancing madman.

"It's you he wants," someone said to Paul, and stringbean yelled, "Lookout, he's got a knife!"

Paul, eyes bulging with fear, and his muscles turning so weak that he could hardly stand, saw Jeronsek drop to the floor and wrap his arms around the insane man's legs, bringing him crashing down. Some of the spectators leaped in to help, and three men clung to the arm holding the knife. That part of the boy's mind which was still able to function, registered the fact that the knife was crudely made, of some kind of sharp metal.

Some one grabbed his arm, as Jeronsek yelled to get the kid out of here, and pulled him into another cell where he stood trembling.

"Don't let him get me. Please!"

"They got him now . . . if they can hold him," said his rescuer. Paul saw that it was the solitaire player with the straggly mustache and goatee. A wave of gratitude surged briefly through him, to be quickly replaced by fear.

"Why don't they call a guard? He shouldn't be in here."

"We don't call guards," the other said sternly. "They'd put him in the hole, in a straitjacket. Anyway, he ain't like this all the time."

Paul, at the sound of a renewed outburst of scuffling struggle in the walkway outside the cell, said, "Why does he want to get me?"

"He's nuts," the other answered. "He caught some guy in bed with his wife, and went nuts. He cut the guy on the ass, as he was going out the window, but he got away. He killed his wife, cut her head almost off . . . and he's still lookin' for the guy. Ever so often he thinks some fish is the guy, and he goes crazy again."

"He thinks it's me? But that's crazeee . . .!" his voice rose to a squeak as the madman loomed in the doorway, swaying and glaring insanely. As he lurched forward, into the cell, the others caught up and swarmed onto his back. He was forced to the floor, and mumbling and glaring, dragged away.

"You better hide somewhere, 'til he calms down."

Paul looked dumbly around at the guy with the goatee, and let himself be led to another cell and

hidden beneath a bottom bunk. Too exhausted and afraid even to cry, he lay shivering, the muscles in his legs twitching, as the rolled up mattresses were pushed in around him. His mind lost track of the time as he lay, listening to the snarls and whimpering growls of the crazy man, who the others had finally turned loose, and who was still looking for him. Jeronsek, and some of the others, would whisper from time to time for him to stay quiet, as the spell hadn't passed yet.

Finally, Jeronsek and his friends pulled the mattresses away and told him he might as well come on out.

"It's no use," Jeronsek said, "He won't quiet down 'til he finds you. There's just one way, maybe."

"What's that?" Paul implored.

"Show him your ass," said the one with the goatee. "He cut the guy he's lookin for on the ass, on the way out the window. Show him you ain't got a scar, and he'll know it wasn't you." He looked questioningly at Paul, and added, "You ain't got no scar there, have you?"

Paul shook his head in denial.

"Hell no, he ain't got no scar," Jeronsek said. "I'll bet he ain't even got no fuzz."

Raving and snarling, the crazy man appeared in the door. At sight of Paul, he began to moan and shake. The others grabbed him as he tried to lunge forward. Paul shrank against the back of the cell, beside the toilet.

"Quick, kid," Jeronsek said, "Show him your ass before somebody gets hurt."

With fumbling fingers, Paul undid his belt and unzipped his fly. He hesitated, and Jeronsek said impatiently, "Come on, show him!" Other voices took up the words, "C'mon, show him . . . show him . . ." they chanted.

Paul dropped his pants around his ankles, and turned around, looking back, shamefaced, over his shoulder. The crazy man bellowed, and began to struggle again.

"Bend over, so he can see good," someone advised.

Paul did, turning his face away from the ring of watching eyes. He gasped, and stumbled forward against the toilet, as something wet and gooey sloshed onto the middle of his bare and quivering backside. His hand went down, reflexively, and brought up some of the substance. It was red, and his first thought was of blood. Then he saw it was some kind of thick baker's jelly.

Laughter exploded in the confined area of the cell, and he jerked up his pants. As he turned around, the sight of the crowd of men packed in the doorway and peering between the bars, all laughing or smiling, sent the blood surging to his face.

He stood there, fastening his belt with shaking hands, flushing hotly. Jeronsek was braying like a jackass, the crazy man grinning hugely, while the others laughed and

whooped. Tears of humiliation welled up in his eyes, and he fought to keep them from spilling over. The bakers jelly, warming, began to trickle down his legs, and he slumped onto the toilet, putting his head on his arms to shut out the grinning faces.

"Look at him, crying like a girl," Jeronsek ridiculed.

Other voices chimed in . . . "Yeah, and lookit that hair."

"Hair, hell. Lookit that skin."

"Ain't she about the purtiest thing you ever seen?"

A hand reached forward and stroked Paul's bare arm. He slapped it away.

"She's playin' hard to get," Jeronsek said. "C'mon, honey, don't be that way." He came forward, and started to run a hand through Paul's hair. The boy threw it angrily aside.

"Leave me alone, you bastard. You had your big joke. Now leave me alone."

"Relax, baby," Jeronsek said, stroking Paul's hair.

Enraged, Paul lunged at his tormentor, driving him back with the suddenness of his charge. Jeronsek laughed as he caught the flurry of blows on his arms, then stepped in and grabbed him. Some of the others closed in around them, and Paul, looking into the flushed faces and feverish eyes, sensed a change in their mood.

What had started out as only cruel horseplay, to relieve the boredom of confinement, had degenerated into something else. Their hands pawed and petted at him from all sides.

Struggling helplessly, Paul felt his belt buckle being undone and his clothes stripped from him. They pushed him onto the lower bunk, and held him face down with his head buried in the pillow.

"Let him go!" a new voice commanded. "Get your hands off of him!"

The clutching hands released him, and he turned over, gasping for air. Through his tears, Paul saw Masovich, the man from the first cell. Jeronsek was facing him defiantly, as the others shifted back.

"What you buttin' in for, Masovich?" Jeronsek demanded. "This ain't none of your affair."

"I'm making it my affair," the other man answered.

"You'd better do your own time."

"Better? You telling me what to do?"

"You ain't tellin us what to do, either."

"Us?" Masovich questioned.

"Yeah, us. You may be pretty tough, but you sure as hell can't take on the whole bunch!"

As Jeronsek spoke the final word, Masovich's hand slammed into his throat, bending his head and shoulders back over the edge of the top bunk. The other hand reached in his pocket and came out with a short, sharp bladed knife.

Jeronsek's eyes went wide with fear as he felt the razor honed point penetrate the skin over his heart.

His face was as pale as though the blood had already stopped pumping.

"God!" he croaked, "Don't, Masovich . . . don't kill me."

"You're nothing but a punk, Jeronsek. Tell your friends here what you are!"

As the other man hesitated, Masovich pressed the point of the blade a little deeper, and said, "Go on, tell them you're a punk!"

Jeronsek forced out the words, "I'm . . a . . punk . ." he gasped.

Masovich released his grip on the other man's throat and pulled the knife away, holding it at his side. Jeronsek slumped onto the lower bunk, and Masovich turned to Paul.

"Get up to the first cell, kid. That's where you're staying now."

Paul had watched the drama with horrified disbelief. He was dazed and certain he was going to see a murder. He hesitated.

"Go on," Masovich ordered. "Nobody'll bother you."

Paul started to ask if he should take his mattress, and then decided against it. He went through the silent men around the doorway, not looking at their faces. They made a passage for him.

Paul felt safer, as he entered the first cell and waited for Masovich. For a moment he wondered if Jeronsek and the others could get an upper hand, but realized immediately that Masovich was too much for them, a lion among jackals.

This cell was almost twice as large as the rest. The solid door and plywood partition over the bars isolated it, gave it privacy. There were shelves and clothing hooks, a battered desk, and two chairs—one of them ancient but upholstered. There was a lid for the toilet. And there was an army cot with springs and clean white sheets instead of the steel slats of the regular bunks.

Paul sat down to wait. He had been wrung dry of emotions and now felt his battered nerves making his body twitch and jump.

Masovich strode in a few minutes later, shutting the door. He carefully stuck the knife into the straw center of a small broom, hiding the weapon, and stood the broom against the wall beside the bed.

"If you're hungry," he said, "There's a couple bacon and egg sandwiches in the top drawer." Masovich stretched out on the cot.

"I couldn't eat," Paul said. "But thank's for doing that."

"That's been brewing between him and me for a long time. You were as good a reason as any to settle it." Masovich was propped on an elbow, watching the boy, and although his case hardened face was expressionless, there was something in his look that made Paul turn his eyes away.

"This is pretty nice, for jail," Paul said.

"For a jail, yeah. I'm used to jails."

"Should I get my mattress and stuff?"

"No."

Paul looked up. "Where'll I sleep?"

Masovich snorted a single half laugh, and meaningfully patted the cot where he was lying. "Right here."

Their eyes met, and the boy's stomach turned over.

"So it's like that?" he asked, managing more matter-of-factness than he felt.

"It's like that . . . unless maybe you want to go out to Jeronsek and the rest. Me or them!"

Paul was overcome with weary resignation. "You're not giving me much choice," he said.

Masovich laughed. "You sleepin' here then?"

Paul nodded.

"Then come on over."

As Paul walked toward the cot, he wondered what his father would think about this.

In the suburbs of the city, in a split-level dwelling behind a neat lawn and trimmed hedges, Jason Morrow was preparing for bed, trying to avoid the reproach in his wife's eyes. As he climbed in beside her, he squeezed her arm.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Don't look at me like that. I'll go get him out first thing in the morning. But don't worry. What could happen to him in jail? I can't think of anyplace safer than that."

Convict?

No. This man is a patient in a mental hospital. Held prisoner by a tortured mind. Psychiatric drugs and other treatments help some of the mentally ill, but for many forms of mental illness no effective treatment has yet been found. The answer is research. Your financial help is needed.

Give to the National Association for Mental Health through your local chapter.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

He opened the stove door and began feeding negatives into the flames . . . negatives of naked girls in various poses.

BLOW-UP

BY JACK LYNCH

PORTRAIT photographer Ronnie Haspurtin, with ascot cinched and mustache trimmed, came out of his bachelor home atop Island Heights as if he were late for an appointment. He crossed to the darkened drive, slipped behind the wheel of his station wagon and began humming a happy tune to himself as he turned the ignition key.

The explosion was heard the length of the island and across Puget Sound as far as Seattle.

Down in Island Center, Deputy Harlin Johnson lowered his fork with a quick glance at his wife. His daughter Marline, apple of her father's eye and those of half the males on the island, paused in her description of a new cheer leader routine with a tilt of her pretty head.

"Whatever do you suppose that was?" she asked.

"Don't know," grunted her father, wiping his narrow mouth and rising. "But whatever it was will draw a crowd of Yahoos intent on blocking traffic and generally making a nuisance of themselves."

Twenty minutes later Deputy Johnson parked in front of the Haspurtin home and made his way through the milling volunteer firemen, auxiliary deputies and half-a-hundred commuters who had just driven off the ferry boat from Seattle when they heard the explosion. He paused beside Joe Wilson, standing next to the pumper. Wilson's men were spraying the charred remains of Haspurtin's station wagon by the eerie glow of floodlights and red blinkers.

"What happened, Joe?"

"Looks like Ronnie Haspurtin got himself blowed up," said Wilson, spitting at the pavement.

"He's in the wreck?"

"He was," said Wilson.

"Where is he now?"

Wilson threw out one hand. "All the way from the house to the road by the looks of things."

Harlin called to a pair of his auxiliary deputies and directed them to start herding onlookers back out of the yard.

"Get some rope and seal off the whole area," he told one. "And a couple of you better plan on spending the night to keep folks away until the county lab people get over. May not be 'til morning."

Inside the house Geoffrey Baxter, publisher of the island's weekly newspaper, discovered what he'd been searching for just as the deputy's voice began shouting orders. It was a thin packet of negatives nearly concealed between two volumes on photography in the living room bookcase. The negatives were 35 millimeter; small enough so the subjects' faces weren't immediately recognizable, but large enough to confirm Geoffrey's distasteful suspicions. The grizzled little printer slipped them into his pocket and raised his Speed Graphic to take a flash photo of the room just as Deputy Johnson entered.

"Evening, Harlin," said Geoffrey, slapping another pack of film into his camera. "Exciting night, isn't it?"

"How'd you get here so soon, you old busybody?"

"Luck of the press, Harlin. Had business in Seattle and was just driving off the ferry when it sounded like the whole hilltop blew off."

The deputy grunted and crossed to a telephone. "What are you after in here?"

"Feature photos," Geoffrey explained, his heart thumping. "Plan to run a whole page of them: the dead man's study; the pipe he may have been smoking just before shooting to his glory. Stuff like that."

Deputy Johnson scowled darkly as he began to dial, but Geoffrey doubted that the scowl was on his account. More likely it was because Harlin had to call in other members of the sheriff's department from the city. It ran counter to the deputy's approach to law enforcement in a closed little community like the island. He viewed the local population as one big family that could best work things out by itself, even if it meant ignoring the letter of the law.

As a newspaper man, Geoffrey Baxter didn't like to ignore anything. At least he never had until now. As luck would have it, the one time Geoffrey was more than willing to turn his back on the principles of journalism, Deputy Johnson was prepared to follow the letter of the law. The dramatic fashion in which Haspurtin departed made the difference.

Geoffrey sniffed and lifted his camera to get a shot of Harlin just as the deputy finished his conversation with the city.

"What was that for?" Harlin asked, putting down the phone.

"Just more feature stuff: 'Deputy Johnson calls in reinforcements minutes after the explosion.' Shows you're on your toes, Harlin."

"Routine, is all," said the deputy, wandering down a bedroom hallway. "We don't even know what sort of crime we have yet."

Geoffrey tagged along with an annoyed expression. "In my own stumbling manner I would suggest either homicide or suicide."

"What makes you say suicide?" asked the deputy, poking through a closet.

. "Why not? It's clean and painless. Oh, I suppose a man bent on self-destruction could go over to the city and leap off a bridge, but on the way down he's apt to have all those discomforting second thoughts. The house here's all electric, except for the oil furnace, and while oil fumes can be noxious they certainly aren't deadly. And with a gun you run the risk of doing little more than painfully wounding yourself. So why not lash together a few sticks of dynamite and wire 'em to the ignition system? Any boob could do it."

"I'll be surprised if that's what this is all about," Harlin observed, making his way out to the kitchen.

"Well, what else?" asked Geoffrey.

The deputy glanced at him sharply. "You know what else." He turned without waiting for Geoffrey's reply, and the older man was more than happy to leave it at that. He followed the deputy back outside.

"Seems funny a professional photographer wouldn't have any of his equipment around," said Johnson, staring off in the distance.

"Must keep it all at his studio over in Seattle."

The deputy grunted. "No neighbors for half-a-mile . . ." He turned, frowning. "Who was the first one here after the explosion?"

"I was, I guess. I was first off the ferry and led the whole parade up. Joe and the pumper arrived about ten minutes later."

"Anyone beside you been inside the house?"

"Nope. They all were too fascinated by the grisly scene out here."

Harlin opened his mouth as if to say something more, and Geoffrey fiddled busily with his camera, but the deputy changed his mind and turned back toward the house.

"Any official comments for the press, Harlin? Before I race off to develop this stuff?"

"Nope," said the deputy. "None at all."

Late Friday, the day after the weekly *Island Express* came out, Geoffrey Baxter was running off Lillian Spencer's wedding announcements on his job press when Deputy Johnson entered.

"Afternoon, Deputy," Geoffrey greeted him, shutting off the press. "What's the good word?"

"Haven't any for you," Harlin muttered, tossing a copy of the *Express* atop a make-up bench.

"Now what's wrong?" Geoffrey demanded. "Didn't you see the pretty picture of yourself on page three?"

"I saw it. I also saw the story; especially the end of it where you quote me as saying a solution to the Haspurtin killing is imminent."

"That's just newspaper talk, Harlin. Keeps the readers curious and prompts them to pick up next week's copy. Shouldn't let it get your goat."

"But there's nothing imminent about it," said the deputy. "I don't know a whole lot more than I did the night I was sitting at the supper table and heard it."

"You mean all those experts the county sent didn't come up with anything?"

The deputy shook his head.

"Couldn't tell anything from the wreckage?"

"Not much," Harlin told him, leaning against a bank of type. "Somebody had plenty of dynamite, though. Just kept stuffing it in a little pocket behind the firewall 'til it wouldn't hold any more."

"Anything special about the electrical lashup?"

Harlin shook his head. "Like you said, any boob could have done it. Same principle as that practical joke torpedo someone put under the hood of my patrol wagon last summer. Scared hell out of me."

"What about the dynamite itself?" asked Geoffrey. "You say they stuffed this little hole until it was full?"

"Uh-huh. Guess they wanted to be sure they got their man. And they sure did."

"Then they may have carried off some extra sticks with them."

"Possible," Harlin agreed. "But in a rural community like this it ain't exactly the hardest thing to come by. Most everyone on the island's had occasion to use it at one time or another for blowing stumps and things."

Geoffrey pursed his lips. "When do you figure they rigged it?"

Harlin shrugged. "Haspurtin's studio in the city was in walking distance of the ferry terminal, so he never drove his car to work. Just hitched a ride down to the North Ferry Landing in the morning, and back up at night. It could have been done any time Tuesday, while he was at work, or even the night before."

Geoffrey picked up one of Lillian Spencer's announcements and studied it closely as he asked, "Find anything in that studio of his?"

"Nope. Was hoping we might, too."

"Like what?"

"Like the kind of trash you were talking about after little Annie Jenkins' death last year."

Geoffrey sucked in his breath, but if Harlin noticed he didn't show it. The deputy just strolled back to

warm his hands over the trash burner in the rear of the shop. Geoffrey turned back to finish running off the announcements, remembering the day little Annie, frightened and shy, had come into his shop. She and her widowed mom managed to scratch out a meager living with only a few chickens, a cow and a garden patch toward the south end of the island. Annie had been a retarded youngster, but she was being graduated last year anyhow. Nobody ever expected her to leave the island, and there was no sense humiliating her with flunking grades all the time.

Annie had stood at the front counter that day, her large, brown eyes darting about the shop, and asked, "You aren't really going to run the pictures, are you, Mr. Baxter?"

"Sure I am; next week, probably," Geoffrey explained, planning his annual high school graduation issue with pictures of the senior class.

He thought she'd be pleased, but she backed toward the door with one fist raised to her mouth, like a terrified child.

"Mr. Haspurtin said you would, if I didn't do like he said. But I been kind of sick lately—and couldn't."

"But that's a fine picture of you, Annie. Your ma should be real proud."

She just shook her head, and fled the shop.

Her manner had perplexed Geoffrey, but what she'd done next had thoroughly shocked him, along with the rest of the island. She'd gone home and hung herself from a peach tree in the back yard. The ensuing autopsy had disclosed she was pregnant.

Geoffrey hadn't connected up the two at the time. He still couldn't figure out why she should resent her graduation photo. As for the pregnancy—well, the girl's mature figure and slow mind was the sort of dangerous combination that could have gotten her into trouble with any number of boys on the island.

Nope. It hadn't been until six months later that the light dawned, when young Tim Bowen, a boy who used to clean up Geoffrey's shop on Saturdays, came home on leave from an Air Force base down in Texas. He'd shown Geoffrey a little photo booklet one of his buddies had picked up over in Mexico. It was the sort of pornography common to border towns: photos of naked girls in various poses. One of the girls pictured had been Annie Jenkins. Geoffrey had sworn Tim to secrecy, kept the book, and at the first opportunity had shown it to Deputy Johnson.

Geoffrey sighed at these painful memories and shut off his press.

"You didn't seem much interested at the time."

Across the room, Harlin turned with a shrug. "Oh, I was interested

all right, but I didn't have anything to go on. Just your theory about Haspurtin having taken the picture that ended up in the book, and that being the photo she was talking to you about, not the graduation picture. And that maybe Haspurtin was holding it over her head to make her do certain things."

"Like get pregnant," said Geoffrey.

"Well, it wasn't a bad theory," admitted the deputy. "But where was your proof? Where was your crime, for that matter? The girl killed herself. There was no way on earth to prove who was responsible for her condition, and God knows the publishers of such trash wouldn't tell you their sources for it."

"You told me all that at the time," said Geoffrey with a sniff. "Sound reasoning, I must admit. What makes you bring it up again now?"

"Lack of motive for what happened the other night, that's what. When we talked about this before I figured even if your theory was right, the girl's death would have been enough of a shock to keep Haspurtin from doing anything that stupid again. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe he was up to his old tricks again, and maybe there was an angry pa, or boy friend somewhere."

"Or maybe he got so ashamed of himself that in a fit of remorse he decided to kill himself."

"And maybe I'll run for President next year," said the deputy, starting back toward the front office. "Anyhow, Mr. Publisher, you don't need to print any more stuff about a solution being imminent. Because it isn't."

"Harlin?"

The deputy turned at the door. Geoffrey hesitated, rubbing one hand across his nose.

"What is it, Geoffrey?"

"Oh, nothing I guess. I was just wondering if you consider the case closed, then."

The deputy stood a moment, one hand on the doorknob; his eyes calmly studying Geoffrey. "No," he said finally, "I wouldn't exactly say that either."

Geoffrey watched him go out and cross to his patrol wagon.

The old newspaper man turned, wiping his perspiring palms on the seat of his pants. If he'd been going to spill the beans to the deputy, that would have been the time to do it. He'd planned to, God knows. A man doesn't spend a lifetime adhering fearlessly to a code of ethics surrounding his profession only to turn his back on it when personal consequences were involved. Yet that's just what he'd done. Maybe if he weren't so old; so tired . . .

Anyway, he'd decided. Changing his mind for about the hundredth time, Geoffrey had decided to end it once and for all. He went back into his shop, past the job press and Lillian Spencer's wedding announcements; past the long row of type cases and the flatbed press

which had recorded the island's joys and sorrows for a quarter century; past the old potbelly trash burner, and into his darkroom.

He knelt and groveled through a storage cabinet filled with boxes of developing paper and packets of film until he found the box he wanted, and returned with it to the shop. He opened the stove door and began feeding negatives into the flames; negatives of naked girls in various poses. He fed the material slowly, making certain each handful was completely burned before adding to it. At the very bottom of the carton were the 35 millimeter negatives he'd taken from the Haspurtin home. He was holding them, waiting for the blaze to die down, when he had an uneasy sensation. Looking up he saw Harlin Johnson in the doorway to the front office. The deputy stood with arms folded, watching him.

The old man's hand began to tremble.

"Go ahead, Geoffrey," the deputy told him softly. "Get rid of it all."

Geoffrey threw in the remaining negatives, slammed the door and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"What's the idea of sneaking back in here that way?" he demanded.

Harlin smiled sadly. "Just satisfying my curiosity," he explained. "You see, Geoffrey, your theory about Haspurtin's little sideline is the only thing that makes sense about his killing. A person wouldn't even have to be as slow witted as Annie Jenkins. He could turn the heads of any number of young girls, promising to make them famous models and getting them to pose for him. And later, if he had a special yen for a gal, he could blackmail her into doing most anything. It'd take a spunky kid to say no."

"That's what I figured," said Geoffrey with a dry mouth.

"Uh-huh. But supposing even that one of these girls did work up enough nerve to go to her pa, or boy friend. I think they'd either bring the matter to me or else try to handle it personally by beating the daylights out of the man. I don't think they'd blow him to kingdom come."

Geoffrey Baxter removed his printer's apron and walked slowly out to the front office. He slumped down at his desk.

"But somebody else might," the deputy continued. "Somebody who might have known what Haspurtin was up to, but had no way of proving it. Somebody who may have held Haspurtin responsible for the death of one girl, and feared something similar might happen to others. Somebody maybe not young enough or strong enough to physically whip the man, but who felt he had to be stopped; and stopped permanently. Somebody, Geoffrey, who decided to play God."

Geoffrey opened his mouth, but

then shut it again without a word. He sat with hands folded on his desk, listening.

"If all this theorizing is correct," Harlin continued, "if none of the girls told anyone about it, there's only three people who might have suspected what Haspurtin was up to. Me, and I didn't kill him; young Tim Bowen, who died last month in Vietnam; and you, Geoffrey."

Geoffrey looked up then, his eyes moist. "You're saying I killed Haspurtin?"

"Nope. I'm not saying anyone did. Haven't any proof. Like I said, I'm just satisfying my curiosity. I figured, though, that if Haspurtin's little sideline was the motive for killing him, then whoever did it might also have the presence of mind to go through his house and get any negatives he might have had. And he'd destroy them, I figure, so none of the folks involved could ever be embarrassed again."

Geoffrey stared back down at his hands.

"Speaking as a law enforcement officer, I can't say that I'm in favor of such personally inspired justice, but I can sympathize with how a man might be driven to it if he figured it were the only way."

Harlin crossed to the door, opened it, and turned back. "Like I said earlier, the solution isn't imminent. I don't expect it ever to be."

Geoffrey sat there several moments after the deputy had left. For the rest of his life he'd have to wonder whether he'd done the right thing in not telling the deputy all he knew about Haspurtin. And he knew plenty, because one day he'd gone to Haspurtin, confronting the man with the photo booklet and what Annie Jenkins had said that time in his office. Haspurtin had blandly admitted his part in the business and dismissed the girl's death as an unfortunate mistake.

"Unfortunate mistake indeed," sighed Geoffrey, looking at his watch. He closed up the shop and went out to his car, got in, and drove north.

One thing Geoffrey had to give Haspurtin credit for: the man had nerve. He'd boldly suggested that Geoffrey join him in his sideline, by letting him process and store his girly negatives in the newspaper dark room, explaining he was nervous about keeping them in his Seattle studio. Haspurtin said that in return for Geoffrey's cooperation, he'd pay a substantial fee and promise to stay away from the island girls, concentrating instead on those in Seattle.

Geoffrey's eyes never strayed from the road as he drove past the dark and empty Haspurtin home. He steered carefully down off the hill and joined the line of cars waiting to board the ferry which would take them across the water for the night's high school football game in a small town north of Seattle. As he waited, Geoffrey shook his

head at his own stupidity. He had agreed to Haspurtin's scheme; not for the money, but figuring it would allow him to keep an eye on Haspurtin and make sure the man kept his promise. All along Haspurtin was just using him, bringing him into the operation to keep him silent. He hadn't stopped fooling with the island girls at all. He'd just kept their negatives—the ones Geoffrey found after the murder—in his home.

The line of cars moved slowly across the ramp. Geoffrey parked his car on the auto deck and climbed the stairs, then strolled outside to watch the departure from the dock. A cold wind blew off the water, and the old newspaper man stood by himself at the rail, as the big boat churned out into the sound.

Abruptly, Geoffrey uttered a dry laugh at the irony of it. The one time he had ignored his ethics and instincts to embrace Harlin's philosophy of letting sleeping dogs lie, it turns out the deputy was convinced he was a killer. Well, that would be an easier cross to bear than knowing who the real murderer was, Geoffrey decided. He didn't want to know. That's why he hadn't bothered to go through the negatives, to learn which island girls had been snared by Haspurtin.

Geoffrey sniffed vigorously into the wind. He turned up his coat collar, planted his feet and jammed his hands deep into his pockets. Let the deputy believe what he wanted. It wouldn't matter a hundred years from now.

A movement on the darkened auto deck below caught his attention.

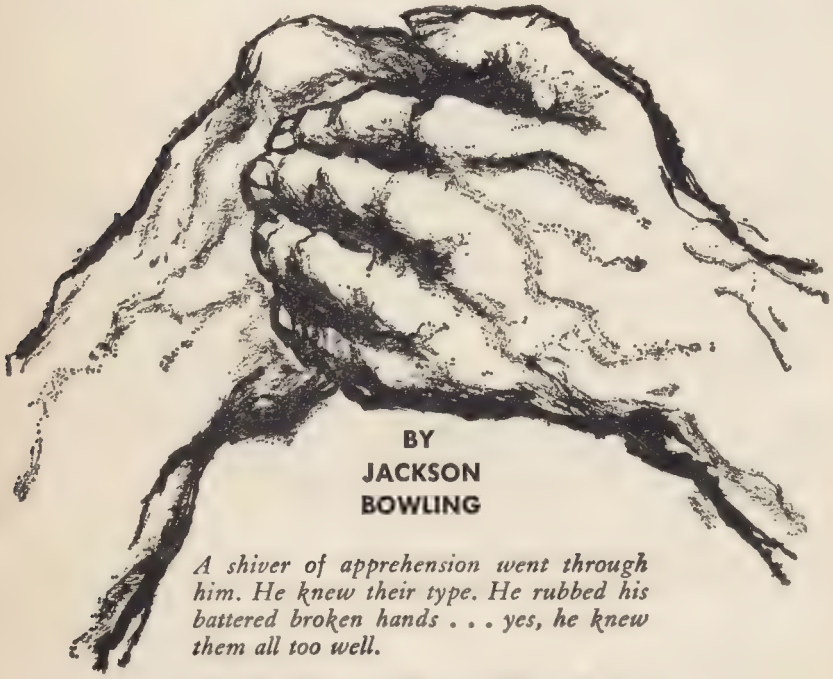
The deck gang had come upstairs. As the solitary figure went quickly to the back edge of the deck, Geoffrey Baxter recognized her: Marline Johnson, the deputy's daughter—apple of her father's eye and those of half the males on the island. She opened her purse and drew out what appeared to be a little booklet. She hurled it out into the water and groped once more down into the large bag, this time bringing out a slender tube, about the size of a stick of dynamite. She threw it after the book, and both disappeared in the boat's frothy wake.

Marline snapped shut her bag with a nod of her pretty head, turned, and disappeared back into the shadows.

Geoffrey Baxter felt a sudden chill in his old bones. He turned slowly from the rail and went inside for a cup of hot coffee.

THE RAIN was still blowing hard against the window of the cafe and in the filling station next door the college kids were still on the telephone. There were two of them and they were standing in the passageway between the two buildings, and now and then the one who was not talking came back into the cafe for more change.

There were four others in the cafe, the counterman and the Dutchman from the flooded farm down the road and the little man who sat with a pretty, dark-haired girl in one of the booths. Outside, a man was trying to start a car on the concrete apron, but after awhile the starter ground down and he came back in, filling the doorway, his hat



BY
JACKSON
BOWLING

A shiver of apprehension went through him. He knew their type. He rubbed his battered broken hands . . . yes, he knew them all too well.

FLOOD

and heavy topcoat dripping water on the scuffed linoleum by the door.

"It's dead," he said, "good and dead."

In the booth, the small man only nodded. The girl looked almost relieved. The big man beat water from his dark hat and went to sit with them.

"Coffee," he told the counterman.

The counterman checked the level of his big urn and draw a cup and set it on the edge of the counter.

"Over here," the big man said.

The counterman looked at him for a moment, little points of light growing in eyes half hidden by brows that were laced with a network of old scars. Then the light passed as quickly as it had come and he came around the counter and set the cup at the big man's elbow.

"Ten cents," he said.

The big one gave him a dime, then caught his sleeve as he started to turn away.

"I ever see you before?" he asked.

"I don't think so," the counterman said.

"You ever fight? In Detroit, maybe?"

The counterman nodded and went around the counter to ring up the dime.

"I fought there, a couple of years ago," he said from the register.

"He done good, too," said the Dutchman, who was waiting to use the phone.

"He don't look it," the big one said.

"I was easy to hit," the counterman said, and turned away. In the booth, the big man only shrugged and went on brushing at the rainspots on his hat. The small man lit two cigarettes and put one in a tray before the girl. She did not touch it. He did not seem to care.

"Excuse me," he said to the Dutchman." We saw a sign. There's supposed to be a motel around here."

"It's on the other side of the bridge," the Dutchman said.

"I don't get you."

"The bridge is under. Didn't you hear the radio?"

The small one shook his head. The big one shook his head, too. The girl just sat looking at her small hands.

"You wouldn't want to go there, anyhow," the Dutchman told them. "It's a real dump, and they'd charge you extra on account of the flood."

The two men in the booth just looked at each other.

"You could stay at my place for nothing," the Dutchman said, "only you're dressed too good to wade in, you and the lady."

In the booth, the men said nothing, and he grinned uneasily and pointed to the muddy legs of his overalls, soaked to a point somewhere between the knee and thigh. The small man glanced at him, then lit a cigarette from the stub of his last. The big one stirred his untouched coffee. He still had not taken off his overcoat.

"I just came down to make a phone call," the Dutchman said lamely. Then he got up stiffly and went around the counter to draw a fresh cup of coffee.

By the cash register, the man with the scarred brows let his eyes slide over the three in the booth, old memories nudging at the fringes of his mind. He did not like the small one because he had seen too many like him before, in the days before they had broken his hands with a ball bat for refusing to throw a fight in Chicago.

The big one thought he had seen him somewhere but he did not remember him and he did not really care. He was thirty-six and he had survived very well in the time after they had broken his hands, simply by not knowing and not remembering. He ignored the men and concentrated on the girl, who did now know him from anywhere and who had nothing to remember.

She was small, he saw, with dark eyes to match her hair, and the thin jacket she wore did a bad job of hiding the clean, curving lines of her young body. Twenty-two, he figured. Maybe twenty-three. Or even twenty-four. You can't tell anymore, he thought.

"Eddie?"

The counterman turned, and the Dutchman gave him a dime for the coffee. Eddie rang it up and went back to scrape the grill. The Dutchman followed as far as the door and stood there, holding his cup.

"I never seen it rain like this before," he said.

"No," Eddie said.

"I got to walk two miles back. You think Charlie would run me out in the wrecker, soon as he gets those kids' car out of the mud?"

"Sure. Sure he will."

The Dutchman nodded his thanks and took a sip of his coffee. Then he motioned back toward the booths.

"Ain't them some hard lookers, Eddie?"

"I seen harder," Eddie said, and went on scraping the grill.

"Well, I never. And that kid with them, she looks scared."

"They're scarey types, Herman. If she wants to run with them, that's her business."

"Maybe she don't, Eddie," the Dutchman said.

"What?"

"Maybe she don't want to be with them."

"You got some of this water on the brain, Herman. That's big city stuff you're talking."

"Well, ain't they from Detroit?"

Eddie shrugged.

"Yeah," he said, "yeah, I guess they are."

"Well, there is it. Maybe. . ."

"Listen, Herman, it's none of your business. I been there and back, remember? You don't butt in, you hear? You don't butt in."

"Maybe I should call the . . ."

Eddie put the spatula down and swung to face him.

"Maybe you should go call and rent that truck and get your stock up out of the water," he said. "Maybe that's what you should do."

Turning quickly away, he went out through the cafe, not looking at the three in the booth, and stopped at the end of the passage.

"Hey, you two," he called. "There's a man here waiting to use the phone."

One of the boys looked over his shoulder and nodded.

"They'll be out of here pretty quick," Eddie told the Dutchman. "As soon as Charlie gets their car back on the road, they'll be going back the way they came."

"The road open, back that way?" the big man called from the booth.

"The radio said it was," the Dutchman told him. "You were the last to come down."

"But the road to Detroit is flooded under?"

The Dutchman nodded.

"The river's still rising," he said. "I . . ."

". . . heard it on the radio," the big one finished.

The Dutchman's mouth snapped shut and his old eyes narrowed as he debated whether to take offense. In the booth, the small one saved him the trouble.

"Hoover," he said, "shut up."

The big man's jaw tightened, but he took it. The small one nodded toward the Dutchman. Hoover looked at him for a moment, defiance kindling in his eyes, and then something went out of him and he turned to the Dutchman.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's nothing," the Dutchman said, and then he looked back toward the telephone, where the boys were just hanging up. He left his worn hat on the counter and squeezed his heavy old body into the passage, wheezing from the dampness as he fumbled in his pocket for a dime.

At the counter, Eddie turned from the coffee urn.

"When Charlie gets back, maybe he can get you through in the wrecker," he told the three in the booth.

"We can't go on without the car," the small one said.

"Maybe Charlie can fix it," Eddie said. "Maybe the battery's just down."

"Yeah. Charlie can charge it up and we can go on when the water goes down."

Eddie nodded.

"Maybe you'd like to eat while you wait," he said. "It's almost three, and maybe you skipped supper."

The two men shook their heads.

"Something for you, miss?" he asked the girl.

"I'm not very hungry," she said.

"Get her something to eat," the small man told him.

"I'm not hungry," the girl said again, a trace of defiance hardening her small chin.

"Get her a hamburger," the small man said.

When the girl said nothing, Eddie went back behind the counter and poured grease out of the simmering pot, resting his broken hands on the wooden rail while it began to sizzle in the close silence. He took a fresh beef pattie from the locker and slipped it into the widening pool of grease, pressing it and shaping it with the spatule he used to scrape the grill.

By turning only slightly, he could see the girl in the booth. The small man was sitting on the outside, blocking her, and he could not see much of her face, just enough to catch the unnatural whiteness of it, just enough to see the trembling of her lips as she sat staring at her folded hands.

As he watched, the Dutchman finished with the phone and went through the station to the garage to wait for the wrecker. Alone then with the three in the booth, Eddie found himself wishing very hard for Charlie, for some sign of the wrecker with the big red danger lights, maybe bringing word that the water was down and the roads were open again.

He took the hamburger over on a plate with the pickle slices ringing it and then he brought the little pots of mustard and ketchup. He arranged it all in front of the girl, looking for some sign in her small face, but she did not even look up. In the uneasy silence, Hoover offered him a hundred dollar bill.

"We don't keep that kind of change," Eddie heard himself say.

"He's got him a real classy joint, don't he, Augie?" Hoover said.

"I like it all right," Eddie told him. "I like it just fine."

The one called Augie cleared his throat and found a dollar bill in his wallet.

"Keep the change," he said. "And don't let Hoover bother you. He gets nasty when he has a headache."

"Maybe he should take an aspirin," Eddie said.

Augie chuckled.

"Yeah, maybe he should."

Hoover didn't laugh. Eddie could see his jaw going tight, felt an old fear rising hard and tight in his own throat. He looked at the girl then, but she had not moved, did not seem to notice the sandwich.

"Are you all right, miss?" he said.

"She's fine," Hoover told him, the edge unmistakeable in his voice.

The girl's eyes came up then, and they were like the eyes of a frightened bird. For a moment Eddie thought she would speak, but then her eyes fell again and she said nothing.

"She's all right," Augie said. "Just a little car-sick, is all. She doesn't like to travel much."

"The road's open to the north," Eddie said. "Maybe I could get a doctor down from . . ."

"Don't bother," Augie told him. "Pretty soon the water goes down and then no one has any problems."

"Maybe . . ."

Hoover shifted in the booth then, looked up at Eddie with his eyes hard like stones.

"Not to change the subject," he said heavily, "but didn't they call you Soldier Eddie, one time?"

"They did."

"I seen you fight once. A nigger damn' near knocked your head off."

Eddie's flat, dark eyes did not change under the scarred brows.

"That was Youngblood Thomas," he said, "and I took him in the ninth."

"I thought he whipped you," Hoover said.

"You must not have stayed for all of it."

Hoover shook his head.

"I got called away," he said.

"You should have stayed. Then you'd know who won the fight."

"I thought he whipped you," Hoover said again.

Eddie shrugged.

"The customer is always right," he said.

"You're a smart bastard."

"That's right," Eddie said, warming to it.

"Hoover," Augie said.

Hoover didn't hear him.

"I seen a lot of you busted-down pugs," he said, "and I never seen one I couldn't . . ."

"Hoover, we got a job to do!"

That got through, slowly. The fire in the big man's eyes began to fade, and before it could come back, the little man caught Eddie's eye.

"Get him a glass of water," he said. Eddie went for it, and from the counter he could hear the low, hard sound of Augie's voice, half-heard, half understood, and when he came back the big man had a packet of pills in his hand, fumbling out two, spilling the rest on the table.

"Thank you," Augie said, "for the water."

Eddie said nothing. The low, controlled edge of Augie's voice made him remember things he wanted badly to forget.

"He got hurt once," Augie went on, "in the head."

"It's nothing," Eddie said. "Forget it."

Augie shrugged.

"See, we're booking agents," Augie told him, his manicured hands tracing little patterns of logic in the air," and Cindy, here, is a dancer. We have to get her to Detroit tonight to fill a contract. We get delayed, and maybe it makes Hoover a little nervous."

"I see," Eddie said, seeing it all too well.

In the long silence that followed, one of the college boys in the garage went into the station for a pack of cigarettes. He waited, but he did not come on into the cafe. Eddie watched him go back to the garage and swing up to sit on the hood of the old jeep with the snowplow blade in the front.

"You're a smart boy, Eddie," Augie said then. "Why don't you just relax and get yourself a cup of

coffee? Like I said, pretty soon the water goes down and no problems."

"Yeah," Eddie said, and went over to the counter, to the urn, like Augie told him, and drew a cup of coffee.

"And sit over here, this side of the counter," Augie said. "We like you. We like to see you. Right, Hoover?"

Hoover just nodded, the banked flames still smouldering deep in his eyes. Swallowing hard, Eddie sat down on their side of the counter, on the stool by the Dutchman's hat. For a long time, no one said anything. Now and then, Eddie could hear the voices of the three in the garage, but only dimly. They sat like that til the lights of a car came slanting through the rain.

"That your buddy?" Augie asked.

Eddie nodded.

"How do you know?"

"I know his lights."

"All right. When he gets here, you have him charge the battery."

"What about the bridge? You can't get through."

"We can go back and pick up the main highway," Augie said.

"You should have taken the main road to start with."

"Maybe we don't like main roads," Hoover said.

"You talk too much," Augie told him. "Eddie, here, might get the wrong idea about us."

Hoover turned, his eyes boring through a screen of cigarette smoke.

"How about it, Eddie?" he said. "You got any ideas?"

"I got a few," Eddie told him.

"You can forget them, real easy," Augie said.

Eddie started to speak, but then the wrecker was coasting to a stop just outside. He looked once through the misted window, then turned slightly to look at the girl again. Her eyes were on him, pleading and afraid. He felt himself tensing, going cold inside.

"Eddie . . ."

It was Augie. He was smiling. There was a .357 in his hand. He lifted it above the table just long enough for it to register, and then he lowered it again, slowly, and covered it with Hoover's hat.

"Be smart, Eddie," he said.

Then the door swung open, letting in a spray of windblown rain, and Charlie came in, his chubby face glistening wet in the neon light.

"I got her out, Eddie. The kids in the garage?"

Eddie swallowed hard, nodded.

"Listen," he said, "listen, Charlie, could you start that Imperial out there before you go? These guys are late for . . . an appointment."

"What's wrong with it?" Charlie wanted to know.

"Just wet, I think," Hoover rumbled. "And the damn' battery's dead."

"I'll look at it when I get back. Right now, I've got to run Herman home and get those kids back to their car."

"Look, we're in a hurry," Hoover said, reaching for his wallet.

It was the wrong thing to do. Eddie saw Charlie's big, open face close up tight.

"Put your money away, mister," he said. "Herman's got a living to make, and he sure can't make it if all his stock come down sick."

Hoover moved to get up, but Augie checked him.

"You'll just have to wait your turn," Charlie said, and then he was gone. Through the window, Eddie saw him climbing into the wrecker, Herman and the two kids right behind him. The wrecker's lights swung away then, lighting the flooded countryside in one long sweep before they straightened out and disappeared down the highway.

"I tried," Eddie said.

"You didn't try too hard," Hoover said. "Augie, let me . . ."

"You're giving Eddie ideas again," Augie said.

"We can take care of that. We can take care of that real easy."

"And the farmer? And those kids? And the mechanic and God knows who else?"

"Ah, hell," Hoover said. "I'll try to start the car again."

"Don't bother," Augie said.

In the silence that followed, the girl looked up from her untouched food.

"Could I . . . could I get some cigarettes?" she asked.

Eddie started to get up, but Augie's pistol came out again.

"It's off limits back there," he told the girl. "A smart boy like Eddie might keep something besides cigarettes."

"I don't keep my guts in a drawer," Eddie said.

"Listen to the bastard," Hoover said.

"Shut up, Hoover. I like him. Eddie and me, we get along just fine."

"Augie, dammit . . ."

"Maybe you should take some more pills," Augie said.

"I can't. The doctor said . . ."

"Then shut up."

Eddie watched their eyes meet, saw Hoover's fall away. Reaching carefully, he found his own cigarettes and tossed them across to the booth. The girl caught them, found a match and lit one. Eddie gave her a grin he thought was reassuring, but it only made his face feel stiff.

"Augie," he began, "I been around . . ."

"We know that, Eddie."

"This . . . whatever you're doing . . . it's nothing personal to you guys, and . . ."

"And you got a little dough stashed away," Augie finished.

"Yeah."

"You ain't got that kind of money, Soldier Eddie."

"That's right," Hoover said.

"I'm talking to Augie," Eddie told him.

"Augie told you all you got to know."

"Maybe I didn't tell him enough," Augie said. "Maybe he thinks we're playing some kind of a game."

"No," Eddie said.

"Well, get this, Eddie. Cindy signed up to do a job and then she backed out. It made some people mad, some pretty big people."

Eddie's eyes cut to the girl. She nodded faintly.

"I thought I wanted to be a dancer," she said, almost whispering, "but after I signed, they wanted me to . . . to do other things. First it was hustling drinks, and then . . ."

"And then you ran out," Augie said. "And then some other broads thought they could run out, too. One of them went to the cops and there was a big smell."

"For that you'll kill the kid?" Eddie said.

"Kill her? Who said anything about killing her?"

"Don't play games with me, Augie. Come out with it."

"It's easy, Eddie," Hoover said. "She don't get dead, but she ain't so pretty any more. You take some acid, and you put some cotton on a stick and you dip it and . . ."

Eddie heard Cindy catch her breath, fighting back a scream even as he felt his own guts going cold.

". . . and you draw pictures," Hoover finished.

Eddie was half off the stool before Augie's gun came up. Hoover's was out, too, a blunt, stubby thing all but swallowed up in his big hand. He stopped a heartbeat before Augie cocked his magnum.

"Easy, Eddie," the little man breathed. "Take it real easy."

"You bastard," Eddie said.

"Sit down, Eddie, before I blow you through that wall."

Eddie sat down, the sickness of defeat rising in his throat. For a moment longer he looked at the little man, and then he looked down to his ruined hands, beaten. In the tight silence, no one moved til Augie motioned with his gun.

"Go see if the wrecker's coming," he told Hoover. The big man went out, disappearing into the rain that hid the highway, then returned with a disgusted jerk of his head.

"You want I should try the car again?" he said.

"I told you, don't bother. We're going to have to wait for the wrecker anyhow. I figure to tie Eddie and his partner up good and tight and shut down the lights. We'll be in Detroit before they're found."

"Well, dammit, let's do something," Hoover said. "This waiting makes me nervous."

"You get nervous real easy," Eddie said.

Hoover just snorted.

"You know," he said, "the more I think about it, the more I think that nigger whipped you."

"You know it all, don't you?" Eddie said. "You know it forward and backward. Well, you can shove it, Hoover. You know where."

"You lousy punk . . ."

"Hoover," Augie said, "maybe you should sit down. Maybe we can all just relax and Cindy can give us a little entertainment."

Eddie's flesh crawled at the look that crept across Hoover's beefy face.

"Maybe she can give us a strip," the big man said, "just like old times."

"I wouldn't give you the time of day," Cindy said.

Augie thought about it.

"We got the stuff with us," he said. "Maybe we could sort of start the job right here."

Eddie shut his eyes, walling out the pure terror in the girl's young face.

"Of course, we'd have to save the best parts for the boss, but I don't think he'd mind if we just . . ."

Cindy's face seem to crumple as Augie's left hand dipped into his pocket. He paused, the hand still out of sight, his small, hard eyes mocking.

"All right," Cindy said, so softly that Eddie almost didn't hear.

"You sadistic little bastard," he said.

Augie only smiled. Hoover grinned, but then he caught the light in Eddie's eyes and his jaw went tight.

"Augie, I think . . ."

Augie cut him off with a wave of the magnum.

"You keep thinking, Hoover, and one of these days you'll get dead. Get over by the door and keep an eye on Eddie."

Hoover went, and Augie eased out of the booth. He motioned the girl to her feet.

"Now, take off your clothes," he said.

Cindy took them off. Eddie heard the skirt go first, and while the girl's trembling fingers worked at the buttons of her blouse he looked sideways at the two men. Hoover was staring, his pistol forgotten in his hand, but Augie was looking at him.

And smiling.

The blouse was gone in a whisper of silk when Eddie looked back, and Cindy's eyes were shut tight as she unhooked her bra. It resisted for a moment, then fell away, exposing her small, perfect breasts. Eddie felt a catch in his throat as he dragged his eyes away, but again it was no good, for Augie still watched, still smiled.

Eddie heard the soft clatter as the girl kicked off her flats, but he wasn't looking. He was watching Augie as the little man's left hand came out of his pocket with the taped bottle and the cotton swabs. Carefully, Augie set them on the table. Almost as an afterthought, he covered them with Hoover's hat.

The girl didn't see. Her eyes were still closed as she stood naked and alone in the middle of the cafe, and for a long time, Hoover's harsh breathing was the only sound. Then she opened her eyes.

"Can I put my clothes on now?" she asked.

"Not yet," Augie said. "The show isn't over."

No one said anything.

"Eddie's got a cot in the back."

"No," Eddie said.

"You lie. I saw it through the door."

"All right. You saw it."

Augie chuckled softly.

"Keep an eye on Eddie," he told Hoover. "Maybe you can have him fry us up some hamburgers."

Hoover nodded, his thick lips pouting a little as he watched the little man motion the girl into the back. He watched Augie follow her in, closing the door behind them, and then he swung back, his pistol coming up.

"All right, you heard him," he said.

Eddie nodded sickly, moved around the counter to the grill. Hoover sat at the counter behind him, the butt of his pistol resting on the worn top.

"If you're a real good cook, Eddie, we might even cut you in on some of the goodies."

Eddie said nothing. The sight of the acid had already told him all he needed to know. Under the trim suit and the hard cover of his toughness, Augie was only another cheap punk, and the waiting was getting him, just like it was getting Hoover. They were waiting for Charlie, all right, and when Charlie came, they were going to do their job on the spot and run. And they would leave no witnesses.

"Come on," Hoover said. "Make with the food."

Eddie moved then, mechanically, checking the grill, checking the steaming pot of grease at one side. He found the patties in the locker and laid them on the rail while he spilled a little grease on the hot metal. When he slipped them onto the grill, the sudden smell of frying meat made him want to vomit.

"You don't look so good, Eddie," Hoover said.

Maybe it was the heavy mockery in the big man's voice, or maybe it was the muffled cry of the girl in the back, Eddie didn't know. He hardly felt scalding heat of the grease pot as he scooped it up. The first pain was just coming through the ruined nerves of his hand when he spun and whipped the scalding grease into the big man's eyes.

Hoover screamed and triggered one wild shot, and then Eddie had him. Vaulting the counter, he rolled under the wavering gun and hit the big man with four short, chopping hooks, feeling the betrayal of his broken hands even as he heard the pistol go skidding away behind the counter.

Hoover was down, but it was too late to locate the gun and Eddie knew it even before Augie slammed through the door in back. He hit the passage running, a step ahead of a bullet that smashed the partition by the phone, and cut through the station to the garage.

Slipping on the grease-spotted cement, he ducked behind the snowplow jeep just as Augie, firing down the passage, rang a bullet off the

raised blade in front. Ducking instinctively, Eddie got the door open and pawed at the ignition, found the keys in place.

It was almost too late as he swung behind the wheel, but the engine caught before Augie could fire again. He saw the little man cut back, heading for the cafe door, and he felt the old trapped, defeated feeling rising in him as he shot the jeep out into the rain.

Augie was waiting for him, his magnum coming up even as Eddie wrenched the wheel over hand. The bullet smashed the windshield as the four-wheel drive clawed for traction on the slippery concrete, and then he saw the little man, face distorted in the neon of the sign, trying for the cover of the stalled Imperial.

It was too late. Eddie saw the little man's mouth open in a soundless scream, felt the breath of his last frantic shot across his forearm, and then the impact flung him into the steering wheel, driving the wind out of him as the jeep plowed to a stop.

For a long time there was only the sound of the rain on the canvas top of the jeep, and then Eddie lifted his head. Over the plow blade, the flickering light from the cafe played over the crumpled side of the Imperial, over the thing that had been Augie.

Eddie almost got the door open before the sickness caught up to him.

Later, much later, he walked back through the rain and pushed into the cafe. Hoover was still on the floor by the counter, his seared face twisting in pain. The girl, dressed then, hovered by the door at the far end of the cafe, her eyes big on him as she waited, poised for flight. He nodded, understanding.

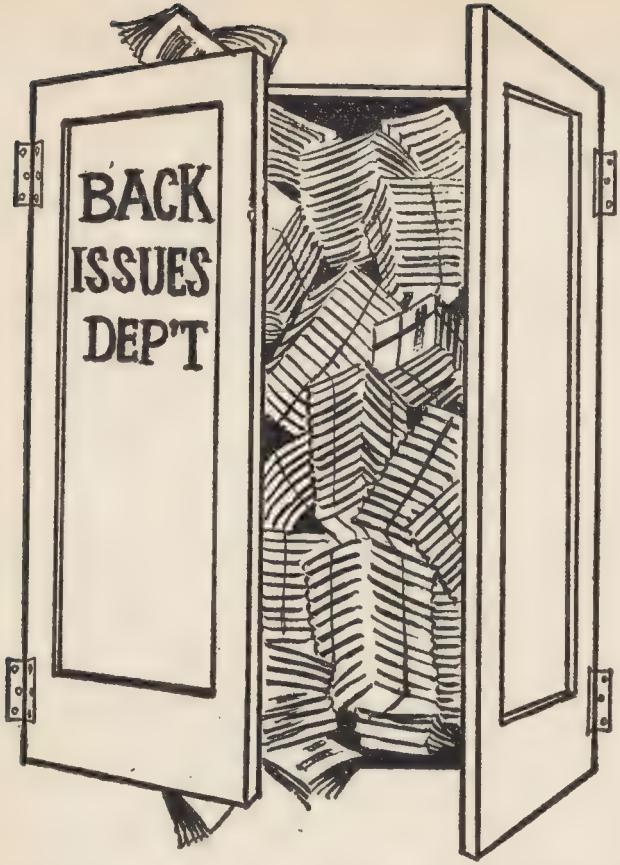
"You better go," he agreed, his voice strange in the silence.

She blinked, managed a little nod.

"I got a Chevy out behind the garage."

Their fingers touched as he gave her the keys, but she didn't lift her eyes. He was vaguely sorry. He had wanted to see if the fear was gone from them. But then it was too late. She was gone. He watched the Chevy's lights swinging onto the highway and sighed heavily. Maybe she would come back, someday. He did not know. He was too tired to care. The time for caring would come later.

Forcing himself to move then, he found a dime and went down the passage to the phone, ignoring the pain of his broken fingers as he dialed the Highway Patrol. Then he let himself go and slumped back against the wall, listening to the dull buzzing at the other end of the line, and with the emptiness still big inside him, he wondered what he was going to say.



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THE SCAVENGERS

It was a hot and humid mid-summer evening in Pennsylvania. In the twisted wreckage of the airliner two hundred bodies were beginning to decompose. Agent Castle searched for an inconspicuous but highly significant attache case.

BY
J. BACHMAN

The S-61 helicopter hacked its way through the early evening sky. Castle moved close to the round port and looked down on the green and tan squares of tangled woodland and cultivated fields that made up the Pennsylvania countryside. The land curved away to the horizon and the setting sun. It would have been an epic pastoral scene were it not for the twisted and charred remains of Trans American Airways flight 937 that lay scattered on a hillside like a handful of junk metal discarded by a malevolent giant.

The chopper glided over the white pine forest where the airliner had made its initial contact. Both wings with their jet pods still attached could be seen through the branches. Castle's eyes followed the path of crushed and torn timber to the edge of the forest. Beyond it, a deep gouge ran down into a ravine where the fuselage had come to rest by a muddy creek. The tail assembly had been cracked loose and it hung limply to one side. Scores of green, white, and blue figures were dotted around the wreckage. Castle knew the greens to be Army and the whites to be medics. He guessed that the blues were state police.

Supposedly, somewhere in the tortured, steel body of the plane was a dead man with an attache

case crammed full of top secret, highly sensitive documents. Both the man and the case had started from San Francisco. They were bound for New York and they had almost made it but not quite. The man no longer mattered. It was the case that Castle had been sent to retrieve.

Four hours earlier, he was standing by a familiar walnut desk at the Agency in Washington listening patiently while the boss briefed him on his mission. The boss was Rear Admiral William Carlisle Hainor, USN; a short, balding man with a pinkish complexion and a fiery temper. When he spoke, he made sharp gestures with his hands, shaking the heavy gold braid on his sleeves until it seemed the stripes would break loose and roll across his desk.

"It took 'em twenty-four hours to do it," said the Admiral, "but they finally found the goddam plane. We got the word half an hour ago. It came down near someplace called Schubert, Pennsylvania. State police say there are no survivors so it's a prttty safe bet that our man Kirby is dead. Poor son of a bitch never had a chance, I guess, but that's neither here nor there. What's important is that he was carrying an attache case full of red hot TS material and we've got to recover it. If we don't, a lot of our top priority projects in the Pacific will be compromised. I can't go into details, but suffice it to say that the loss of the papers would be disasterous to our security."

Castle seated himself in a comfortable leather chair near the Admiral's desk. "By now, those TS papers are probably blowing across the countryside."

"Not very likely," retorted Hainor. "The material was put in one of our special courier cases. You know the type—steel with a fireproof vinyl covering. It was locked in California and I've got the only other key. If it's there, it'll be in one piece with the papers safe inside."

Castle's brow rumpled into a frown. "I don't like the way you said, *'if* it's there,' Admiral. Somebody else besides us looking for it?"

Hainor extracted a thick cigar from a humidor on his desk. He dipped it in the flame from a platinum lighter engraved with two stars. "Security thinks Kirby was tagged in San Francisco. They feel that the other side planned to make a grab for the papers."

"Does Security think the plane was sabotaged?"

"They're not sure," replied Hainor, "and neither is anyone else at this stage of the game. Two nights ago it was executing a normal flight plan when it suddenly dropped off the radar scopes. No radio calls were received. The next thing we know, it turns up smashed to bits in Pennsylvania. Your guess is as good as mine, al-

though I don't imagine it would be very difficult to plant a bomb in an airliner and time it to go off over an isolated area."

"No, I guess not," said Castle, "if you don't mind killing two hundred people to get one man."

"Admittedly, it's a brutal stratagem but you can see how effective it would be. An airliner follows a set flight path and keeps a set speed. You simply figure out when it would reach a certain point and time a bomb to go off. The plane crashes and in the confusion, you get an agent into it. He grabs the attache case and then disappears before the authorities arrive on the scene. No witnesses and no chance of capture." The Admiral was half puffing, half chewing his cigar. "Since there is the possibility of foul play, it's imperative that we get a man up there quick."

"And I'm the man?" questioned Castle.

"Yes," replied Hainor. "I want an experienced agent on the scene and you are he. One of our Sabreliners will take you from Dulles Airport to the Indiantown Gap Military Reservation. From there, you can hitch a ride in a chopper to the crash site. The Army has been tasked with getting the bodies out."

"When do I take off?"

"The jet is warming up now."

Castle got to his feet. "Anything else, Admiral?"

"Yes. A check with the airline indicated Kirby was assigned seat 24 in the first class compartment. Start there and keep me posted."

"Yes sir."

Castle headed for the door as the Admiral called after him. "One last thing, Mark. Watch yourself up there. If that case is still in the plane, the other team might still try to grab it. Be sure you get yourself and those papers back here in one piece."

The helicopter's engines increased in pitch as it began to lower itself into a small clearing near the crash site. On the ground, three other olive-drab choppers squatted like giant mantises receiving the basket litters of bodies shrouded in Army blankets. Castle felt the slight shock as his copter touched down. He unfastened his seatbelt and made for the door following a working party of ten soldiers sent to relieve one of the details presently on duty. He jumped to the ground and got out from under the airblast created by the windmilling rotors. When he reached the edge of the clearing, he found a young Infantry lieutenant waiting for him.

"Are you Mister Castle?" he queried.

"Yes," replied Castle reaching into his pocket and bringing out the I.D. credentials for the officer's inspection.

"Glad to know you. My name's Tom Larner. Headquarters radioed that you were on the way so I thought I'd come up to meet you."

Castle looked at the young man in dirty and rumpled fatigues. His face was smudged with dirt and sweat stood out on his forehead. Dark shadows were etched under his eyes which had obviously seen a great deal of carnage in the last several hours. "It's getting dark. "Let's get down to the wreck."

Castle followed the young officer down a well-tred path that had been forged out of the hillside by men carrying bodies up from the plane.

"Any survivors?" asked Castle.

"None. The plane didn't burn much since the wings and fuel tanks were chopped off up there in the forest, so we've accounted for all the passengers. No one got out."

"Who found the wreck?"

"State police saw buzzards circling over the area and came to investigate."

"Any idea of what caused the wreck?"

"There's a man from the Civil Aeronautics Board checking the wreckage now."

The two men stopped at the bottom of the ravine and looked up at the mangled fuselage with its gaudy markings mocking the scene. A steep ladder ran up to the aft door of the plane and several men were gathered around it helping to lift down a basket litter.

"We're getting the bodies out of the third class compartment now, said Larner. "Quite a job in this heat." He took a couple of slow swats at a swarm of gnats buzzing around his wet face. "Maybe it'll be better after dark. Headquarters is sending out floodlights and a field generator so we can work through the night."

"Guess I'd better take a look inside," said Castle.

"Suit yourself," said the Lieutenant, "but take a good gulp of fresh air before you go in."

"Right," said Castle and followed the young officer up the ladder past the curious gazes of fatigued and sweating soldiers who were puzzled at the presence of the fresh looking man in civilian clothes. When they got into the fuselage, they had to wait for another litter to be passed out before they could move forward.

"Where you headed?" asked Larner.

"First class compartment," mumbled Castle picking his way down the debris-filled aisle which fell away at a slight angle. With the setting sun throwing weird, red shafts through the ports and with the bodies and personal effects strewn about, the scene made Castle think of a dump shaft going down to hell. The temperature and the odor helped to complete the illusion.

"Twenty-eight; twenty-six; twenty-four;" said Castle counting the numbers on the seats. The body in seat twenty-four was that of a middle-aged man with thinning blond hair and a deep suntan. His mouth was a red gash of dried blood and his eyes stared expressionless at the

overhead of the plane cabin. Castle leaned forward and moved the lids over the eyes.

"Your man?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," said Castle straightening up and beginning to probe around the area.

"What do you hope to find?"

"An expensive-looking attache case about yea big," replied Castle approximating the dimensions with his hands. "It should be here somewhere."

"Are you a reporter?" asked a husky voice from behind.

"No," said Castle turning to face a crewcut young man in a dirt-smudged, light tan suit. "Are you?"

"This is Mr. Payne from CAB," said Larner by way of explanation.

Castle handed Payne his I.D. card.

"O.K.," said Payne returning the credentials. "Sorry about the mistaken identity, but I wanted to make sure there were no reporters permitted in the plane until the rest of my people get here and we complete our investigation."

"What's up?" asked Castle.

"It was a bomb," replied Payne. "Plastic explosive. Shaped charge. A real professional job. Went off in the tail section rupturing the fuselage and severing control cables. They never had a chance."

"What kind of person would do something like this?" asked the lieutenant in an almost absent-minded tone.

"Probably a goddam psycho," said Payne mopping his brow with an already sodden handkerchief. "Aw, what the hell difference does it make?" The CAB man turned and made his way up the twisted aisle.

Castle and the lieutenant made a thorough search of the first class compartment but there was no attache case. Larner obtained a couple of flashlights and they searched again after the sun had set but to no avail. Castle was beginning to think that the Admiral's worst fears had been realized. Since the plane had not burned, it would have been easy for an agent to get into the wreckage shortly after the crash, find Kirby and the case, and get out before the authorities arrived on the scene. Castle felt it was time for him to contact the Admiral and let him know the latest developments. He played the beam of his light over the compartment for one last time and stopped it on Kirby's crushed form.

In the bright beam of the light, Castle noted a white band on Kirby's wrist. It was in prominent contrast to his dark suntan. He moved closer and found that it was a band of white flesh where one would normally wear a wristwatch. Even though it was highly unlikely that the watch could have been broken off the wrist in the crash, Castle checked the area around the seat. Finding nothing, he called to Lieutenant Larner.

"Ask your men to check some of

the bodies they're taking out for valuables—rings, bracelets, cash, watches and the like. Tell 'em to check thoroughly."

"Alright," replied Larner somewhat puzzled. He made his way out of the plane.

Castle propped his flashlight on an overturned seat and began to search Kirby's clothing. His wallet was in his coat pocket but it contained no money. There was a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket, but no matches or cigarette lighter. Castle grabbed the flashlight and made for the door of the plane. He climbed down the ladder and took a couple of deep breaths. The air was thick, moist, and warm—typical of the summer in Pennsylvania—but it was fresh.

Larner came over to where Castle was standing. "Funny thing about those bodies," he said. "I told my people to check 'em and there wasn't a single article of value on any of 'em. No jewelry and no cash. No nothing. It's kind of weird. What do you make of it?"

"Scavengers," replied Castle flatly. "When we couldn't find the attache case, I thought it had been taken by certain parties but they wouldn't have been interested in picking up loose jewelry and money. It seems pretty apparent that this wreck was searched and looted by someone else. Probably someone who either saw the plane crash or came upon it shortly afterward."

"You mean that someone went through this wreck and stripped the bodies of all valuables?"

"Exactly," replied Castle. "It's been done before. Tell me, lieutenant, is there anyone here who knows this area well?"

"There's a couple of state police officers."

"Good. Let's find them."

The crash site was now illuminated by the brilliant blue-white beams of carbon arc searchlights. Fresh crews had come to relieve those that had worked throughout the day and the procession of basket litters continued up the hill where the occasional whine of turbine engines indicated another chopper outward bound with its grisly load. Lieutenant Larner led Castle over to a large field tent where two men in blue uniforms squatted on the ground drinking coffee from tin cups. They got to their feet as Larner and Castle approached.

Larner introduced Castle as he passed his I.D. credentials to the two police officers.

"You know this area well?" asked Castle of a tall patrolman with sergeant stripes on his sleeve.

"Yes sir. Born and raised right around these parts."

"Any people live close to here?"

The sergeant took a sip from his cup. "Couple of small farms on the other side of the hill, but that's about all. No towns for a good distance. Why do you ask?"

"I think one of the local citizens has been through the wreck and

looted it. There are no valuables on any of the bodies."

The sergeant flipped the dregs of his coffee cup on the ground. "Well, that just beat all," he said disgustedly.

"I'd like to check out those farms you mentioned."

"So would I," said the sergeant.

"We can split up so that all the farms can be covered as quickly as possible."

"What's the rush?" asked the other patrolman.

"One of our couriers was killed on that plane and an attache case containing classified papers is missing. It's important that it be found as soon as possible. Can you tell me how to get to the nearest farm?"

"Sure," said the sergeant squatting down. He picked up a stick and began to draw a rough map of the area on the soil. He sketched the crash site and located the two farms in relation to it. "Me and my partner will take this one," said the sergeant indicating the farm that was farthest away.

"Good," said Castle, "I'll take the other." He turned to Larner. "If we're not all back here within an hour and a half, notify the state police."

"Roger."

"Alright, let's get going."

Castle borrowed a heavy duty flashlight from Larner and made his way out of the ravine, over the hill and down a narrow footpath on the other side. He followed the path through a stand of white pines to an open cornfield on the slope of the hill. Across the field he could make out the farmhouse. He switched off the flash and pulled the .38 Combat Masterpiece from his shoulder holster. He flipped open the cylinder and saw the six silver cartridges gleam in the moonlight. He closed the weapon and replaced it in the holster. Then, using the flashlight as a probe, he made his way through the tall corn stalks toward the farmhouse.

It was a rickety, lopsided, sagging structure that looked as if it had been washed up the side of the hill by a giant tidal wave and had stood where the wave left it for hundreds of years. Gray, weatherbeaten boards showed through the peeling whitewash and the black tar roofing hung over the drain gutters like sheets of black snow. As far as Castle could see, there was light in only one room of the house so he eased up to the window and peered in.

It was a dingy room where a Coleman lantern cast a strange glow on scarred and dusty furniture and a threadbare carpet. In one corner sat several pieces of expensive airline luggage and two or three briefcases. At the center of the room, a young girl was sitting at a heavy wooden table trying to open an attache case with a large screwdriver. Castle recognized the case. He moved away from the window and silently approached the door of the house. It was unlocked and he let

himself in. The girl had her back to the door and was still trying vigorously to open the case. As a result of her concentration, she did not hear Castle's approach.

"You're wasting your time," he said. "You can't open it."

The girl gave a little cry of surprise and jumped up from the table. She whirled about to face Castle holding the screwdriver tightly in her fist as if it were a bayonet. She was tall, blonde, suntanned and built as only a farm girl could be. She wore a short-sleeved white blouse and very short shorts that gave Castle plenty of opportunity to admire her long, slender legs. Her feet were bare. "Who are you?" she snapped.

"My name is Castle. I came down from the crash site. Who are you?"

"Jenney Peters."

"You live here alone?"

"No," she said. "I live here with my Dad."

"Where is he?"

"He went over to the Schaffer place, but he'll be back any minute," she said as if to frighten Castle. "What you want here?"

"For one thing, that attache case," he said pointing to the table.

"You a cop?"

"No," said Castle, "but that case belongs to the people I work for."

The girl dropped the screwdriver on the table with a bang and then slumped down on the chair in which she had been sitting. "I told Dad it was wrong to take stuff out of the plane. I knew we'd get caught." She put her hands up to her face and began to sob.

Castle pulled another chair up to the table and sat down by the girl. The light from the Coleman lantern was beginning to fade so he pumped up the pressure. "Tell me about it."

"What is there to tell," she said between sobs. "We heard the plane crash and went up the hill to see it. Dad got into the plane and when he found they was all dead, he started taking things. The farm's been losing money for years and he thought that he could sell some of the things he took and we could make a fresh start someplace else." She took her hands away from her face and looked at Castle with moist, brown eyes. "He's not a bad man, Mr. Castle. He tried to keep the farm going after momma died but he got to drinking and all his luck turned bad. Can you blame him for wanting a new start?"

Castle put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Look, Jenney, you and your father should go to the police and soon. It will be better if you give yourselves up."

"The hell it will," said a gravel voice behind Castle's back. He turned in his chair to see a stocky man in blue overalls. His face was deeply tanned and creased by the elements but nevertheless featured the blue-veined nose and watery eyes of the alcoholic. He was holding a twelve gauge Savage autoload-

ing shotgun and it was levelled at Castle's face.

The girl got up and went to her father's side. "I didn't hear you drive up."

"I left the truck down the road apiece. Just as I left Schaffer's place I seen two state cops on the road. Figured there might be some here too. Who's he," said Peters gesturing at Castle with the shotgun barrel.

"His name is Castle. He came down from where the plane is. Please put the gun down, Daddy. Don't hurt him. We don't want more trouble." The girl tried to take the gun from her father's hands but he pulled away from her.

"Leave me be, Jenney. There ain't going to be any trouble. I just need a little time to think."

Castle could tell that the farmer had been drinking recently. His movements were sluggish and his speech was thick. "Your daughter is right, Peters. Put the gun down and we'll talk this out." Castle casually moved in his chair to be in a better position to jump Peters if he had to.

"No," snapped the farmer. "I'll do the talking here. I worked this farm for twenty years. It was a good place once. Good crops. But things been going bad lately. We got to get away from this place and go somewhere and start new, my daughter and me. Maybe I ain't been the best father in the world," said Peters looking at his daughter, "but I'm going to make it up to her for all the bad times. She's a good girl, mister, and she deserves better. Well, I'm gonna sell that stuff I took from the plane and we'll be happy again. This is our big chance for a fresh start."

The bullet came through the window shattering the glass. It was the same window that Castle had looked through earlier. The slug caught Peters in the chest and knocked him to the floor as if kicked by a horse. He lay unconscious with the shotgun at his side. The girl screamed and bent over her father's body as Castle came off his chair in a vain attempt to protect her from any other bullets. He was half way to her when a man stepped through the door and yelled, "Everybody freeze!"

He was tall and thin with a hawk face and intense, clear eyes. The kind of eyes that can sight down a gun barrel and hit a target at five hundred yards without the aid of a scope. He stood in a gunman's crouch with the Walther automatic trained on Castle. "Back up," he snapped at Castle. "And you," he said pulling the girl to her feet and shoving her in Castle's direction, "get over there with him."

Both Castle and the girl moved back into a far corner of the room as the gunman checked the body.

"You killed him," sobbed the girl.

"He's not dead yet," said the gunman, "but he will be."

"What do you want?" asked Castle.

"The same thing you do, bright boy. The courier papers."

"Did your people blow up that plane?"

"Yes, but it was a botched-up job. The bomb went off three minutes late and the plane didn't fall where it should have. I didn't get to the wreck on time. Somebody got there before me and cleaned it out. This stupid farmer almost caused me to fail in my mission." He nodded in the direction of the prone figure. "But he'll pay for it." The gunman looked about the room and spotted the airline luggage and the briefcases. He picked up the briefcases and dropped them on the table near the attache case which the girl had been trying to open. Keeping his gun trained on Castle and the girl, he attempted to open all of them and discovered that each was locked. "Alright, bright boy," he snapped at Castle, "I haven't got time to play around. Which of these cases is the right one?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Castle.

"Don't stall or I'll kill the girl."

"You'll kill her anyway, so what's the difference?"

The gunman smiled. "I'll tell you, bright boy. I can make her die slowly. I got six rounds left. I'll start with her legs and work north. That's the difference."

Castle could tell that the gunman meant what he said. He was a professional killer, a bit psychotic perhaps, but he was an expert with weapons and was fully capable of carrying out his threat. Castle had to weigh the girl's safety against the contents of the attache case and delaying the gunman until help arrived. He himself could accept death. It was part of his job. But the girl was only an innocent pawn in the game. And yet, if the papers in the case were as important as the Admiral had said they were, he had to do everything in his power to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. He gave a quick look at Jenney and saw her eyes wide with fear. She was wringing her hands in nervous anticipation. She was alone and helpless and only he could help her, but she lost. She had to. Hainor said he wanted an experienced agent on the scene and Castle was certainly that. "Start shooting," he told the gunman.

The Walther automatic dipped and took aim at Jenney's right kneecap but before the shot came, the farmer recovered consciousness on the far side of the room and gave out a moan of pain. The gunman whirled about at the sound and fired at Peters. It only took a couple of seconds to do this but when he turned back to face Castle and the girl, his only sensation was a roaring in his ears and then redness turning to blackness as the slug from Castle's .38 caught him in the right eye.

Castle watched the gunman fall backwards across the table, knocking it over and throwing its contents across the floor. He moved swiftly to pick up the Coleman

lantern and the attache case. Then he walked over to where the girl was bending over her father's body.

A thin line of dark blood ran out one side of the farmer's mouth and his tanned face was turning to the greenish-gray pallor of death. Castle set the lantern on the floor and bent down near the girl.

"If he hadn't taken those things from the plane, he'd be alive now," she said through tears. "All he wanted was a fresh start. Another chance. Was that so bad? But I guess you can't understand. I guess you never needed a fresh start. Or maybe you never wanted one."

For a moment, Castle looked down the years of his life. A life of cunning and critical decisions. A life of anonymity forever sealed by cover names and code words. A life of blood—the people in the plane, the farmer, the gunman, and almost Jenney too. He knew he could probably never change any of it but there was still a part of him that wanted to try. He put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "I understand," he said. "Believe me, I understand."

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HARRY BURNS felt lucky. As he leaned his tall, spare frame against the thick, glass door of the Desert Club, he sensed that this was going to be his big night. The very walls seemed to vibrate with excitement as he entered the cool, artificial atmosphere of the lobby. Beyond the desk lay the vast, sunken casino area. It was richly carpeted and surrounded by leather armchairs behind wrought iron railings, so the faint-hearted could observe in safety.

He walked quickly down a narrow lane between two opposing banks of slot machines. A smile played across his thin, dark face as he observed that it was impossible to reach any point in the hotel beyond the front desk without being funneled through a bottleneck of these one-armed bandits.

Normally, Harry would have stopped long enough to at least contribute the loose change in his pocket. That was the theory behind the floorplan. Indeed, it's a rare individual who can resist their silent call. But Harry did. Not any time for nickel and dime stuff tonight, he thought. I'll either hurt them badly or I'll leave here broke.

This encounter had been on his mind for three months, ever since his company held it's annual meeting here last summer. That was the first time Harry gambled and, like

BY
DALE L. GILBERT

THE LUCKY PREY

Las Vegas is a toothy town. For every fish there are a dozen sharks.

most beginners, he didn't know enough to make mistakes, so he won. He'd taken twelve hundred dollars of the Desert Club's money home to Anaheim. That was two months take home pay; it should have made Harry very happy. It didn't. All he'd been able to think about since was the possibility of building that twelve hundred into some real money. Finally, he could stand it no longer, so he took a thousand dollars of his winnings and boarded a plane for Las Vegas. His wife, June, asked to come but he refused. Harry discovered on his first visit that successful gambling is partly intuitive and required complete concentration. She gave in at last when he promised they'd go back together just to see the shows, if he won big.

Harry headed straight for the nearest roulette table, turning sideways at times to thread his way through the mass of people engulfing each table. He had won before by a slow, plodding method at the crap table. He'd backed the "Don't Come Bar" every play and doubled his bet every time he lost until he won. He'd also played the "Field" when certain players had the dice. It didn't seem logical but he observed that some people routinely threw a high percentage of "Field" numbers while others rarely did. There would be none of that tonight, though. In no more than half an hour he'd either be broke or a whole lot richer.

"Pardon me, please," Harry said, as he elbowed his way through to the rim of the roulette table.

"Change, please—hundreds," he told the coupier. His thousand dollar bill disappeared into a half-inch wide slot in the table. Ten flat, white plastic tokens were pushed before him by means of the dealer's limber, wooden rake. The tokens had, "Desert Club, $100," on them.

A hard-looking blond with dark eyebrows appeared at his elbow and asked, "What'll you have to drink, sir? Compliments of the Desert Club."

"Screwdriver," he said, smiling. Harry knew it was the policy of the house to keep pushing free drinks, especially to those playing with hundred dollar chips. The idea was to keep everybody loose. A drunk and his money are soon parted, he thought. Even so, he did have a dry, foul taste in his mouth and one drink wouldn't hurt.

"Twenty-one, black," announced the coupier in a boored monotone.

There are three narrow bars running the length of a roulette table. Each bar contains twelve numbers, one third of the numbers comprising the wheel. The first bar includes one through twelve. The second has thirteen through twenty-four and the last has twenty-five through thirty-six. Noting that the last number called had been in the middle bar, Harry put a hundred dollars each on the first and last bar.

The steel ball began it's mad cycle

around the lip of the wheel. With a flourish, the coupier sent the wheel itself spinning in the opposite direction to the ball. Everyone seemed mesmerized by the blur of the wheel and the metalic purr of the running ball. Harry looked off toward the distant piano bar, afraid to watch. The pitch of the spinning ball became lower and lower until the ball dropped into one of the pockets surrounding each number. It seemed disatisfied with it's first choice and jumped twice more before it stayed.

"Seven, red."

Now Harry dared watch as his token was raked in by the house from the third bar. Then, two more white tokens were placed on top of his on the first bar. Happily, he picked them up and placed two tokens each on the second and third bars. It's working, he thought; it's working just like it did on that little roulette game I bought at the dime store. His method was very simple. Harry merely avoided the bar that came up last and covered the other two. Since the bars paid two-to-one, he would always lose on one bar but pick up two on the other bar. Hours of trials on his little plastic roulette game at home had shown that this method would pay far more often than not. By doubling his bets, win or lose, he hoped to win a lot of money in a very short time.

Twenty minutes later, Harry had a problem. There wasn't any room left in his sweater pockets for chips. He was wearing the same green cardigan that he wore on his last trip. Not that he's superstitious, just a man who believes in covering all the bases. Now both side pockets were bulging with flat, white tokens. He had no idea how much he'd won but all of a sudden his knees became weak and he knew it was time to quit. The tired-looking girl with the free drinks had replaced his glass several times and as he drained the current one he made a grimace. It tasted bitter—a sure sign that he'd had enough.

Quickly, he circled the large room to avoid the crowds and went up to the cashier. Grinning like a kid, he piled the tokens on the counter and was disappointed at the clerk's apparent lack of enthusiasm.

"I guess you see lots of people win more than this every night, huh?"

"Not too many," said the cashier, still counting. "You got an even eleven thousand here. How do you want it?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry said, weakly. As the bills were placed in his moist hand, the effects of tension and vodka hit him. He felt weak as a kitten and his hands shook noticeably. Looking at his watch, he saw that he could still make it on the eleven fifteen flight to Los Angeles. Hurrying toward the entrance, he rested his hands in his pockets. His right hand encountered something hard and smooth—another chip. The cashier's cage was on the opposite side of the room now and he

wanted very much to catch that plane and get home.

"Here, I'll donate something to the cause," said Harry and he tossed the remaining chip onto the nearest roulette table. He couldn't resist pausing at the three steps leading up to the lobby level. Looking back, he noticed the token had landed on number five. As the steel ball fell and the wheel slowed, a gasy arose from the crowd around the table. Even before the call, "five, black," Harry knew he'd won by the covetous looks directed at him.

"How about that?" he said, flippantly, trying to mask his excitement. The pile of white tokens was there, waiting when he reached the table. There were thirty-six of them, including the one he'd tried to dispose of. Harry was aware that everyone at the table was staring at him. He nervously gathered up the awkward pieces and once again began the long, round-about trip to the cashier's cage.

"O.K., I'm impressed," said the clerk. "That's gotta be one of the quickest big hits I've seen." He handed Harry a thick pile of hundred dollar bills. Shaking his head and laughing, he said, "you're really having yourself a lucky streak, ain't you, kid?"

Harry accepted the money reverently and stuffed it in his other trouser pocket. In a daze, he ambled across the room and out the front door, lost in deciding whether to pay off the mortgage or buy a yacht first. There would be enough for both, he decided.

There was a taxi directly in front of the club and the driver held the door open and said, "airport, sir?" So preoccupied was Harry that he was comfortably settled in the cab before he noticed the man seated with him in the back.

As soon as the car swung out into the busy six-lane street, the heavy-set man spoke to Harry. "Do you want ta live ta get on the plane, pal?" While saying this, he moved nearer and grabbed Harry's arm in a vice-like grip. He was an immense fellow, tall as Harry but twice as heavy.

"I seen you clean 'em out back there. Me, I'm not so lucky as you, so I figured I'd take what you won. A lucky guy like you, you can go back in there and win some more any time, right?"

A wave of nausea swept over Harry. "Don't be silly. Let go of my arm," he said and struggled vainly. He glanced up front to the driver for help but one look at the evil little wolf-like face grinning back at him told him there would be no help from that quarter.

The huge hand tightened it's grip on his forearm. "We can do it two ways, pal. Give us the money nice and we drop you off a few blocks from the airport. The other way we still get the money, only you never get to the airport. You end up out in the desert—dead."

Harry's fear gradually gave way

to a stronger emotion—anger! He thought of all the years it would take him to save as much as he now had in his pockets. I can buy my own business, he thought; be my own boss. The money meant many things to him and they were all worth fighting for.

Looking the brute next to him right in the face, Harry said, "O.K., you can have it." He leaned over sideways against the thug as he reached into his pants pocket. The grip on his forearm let go. He brought out two of the precious bills in the semi-darkness of the cab. Under cover of the bills, he brought out something else—his cigarette lighter While fumbling in his pocket he turned the set screw all the way open on the lighter so it would give off a high flame. He'd set it that way many times to light the barbecue and as a joke at parties. This wasn't going to be funny.

"Here you are; I don't want any trouble," Harry said. As the big man reached for the bills, Harry suddenly thrust his right hand under the other's chin and flicked the lighter into flame.

"Oh, God, don't!" The thief's plea became a hideous scream as the desperate young man held the lighter under his beefy, scarred chin. When he automatically put his hands to his chin, they too were burned. Then Harry threw open the cab door and jumped. He lit running and managed to keep his feet. Darting between two houses, he didn't even allow time to glance over his shoulder at the cab.

As long as the terror persisted, he felt strong and ran at great speed without tiring. Some minutes later, he realized the danger was passed and suddenly he could no longer stand. He fell onto a cement step at the rear of a darkened building. Though the night was warm, he shook violently. A low, animal moan escaped him, unevenly, in time with his convulsions. He couldn't stop either the sound or the shakes. The terribly stench of burning flesh lingered in his nostrils in spite of the sweet desert air all around him.

Eventually, he regained control of himself enough to get up and walk. Harry felt an overwhelming desire to get out of Las Vegas and that desire gave him the strength he needed. Walking several blocks, he arrived at a brightly lighted street. Two more blocks and there was a cabstand in front of a hotel. He climbed into the first cab, after assuring himself that it was not being driven by the small animal-looking man who'd been behind the wheel of the other car.

"Airport, please."

"Sure, Mac. Goin' home a winner?"

Harry warmed to the human companionship offered by the cabbie. His terrifying experience was already losing some of it's horror and he felt that he'd returned to the safe and sane world.

"No," Harry answered, "but I didn't get hurt too bad so I guess I'm lucky at that." He didn't feel so secure that he was going to volunteer the information that he'd just won over fourteen thousand dollars.

"That's right," laughed the driver. "That's the way you got to look at it, alright. If they don't take you for every dime you got and some you ain't got—you're damn lucky. You should hear some of the sob stories I get on this airport run."

The driver narrated several tales of fiscal disaster while Harry sank back against the seat and relaxed.

"Hey, you asleep? We're here, buddie."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I must have dozed off." Harry rubbed aching eyes, attempting to make them focus. He opened the door and swung his long legs out onto the sidewalk. As he pulled himself from the low seat of the cab, his gaze swept over the glass-enclosed waiting lounge and baggage check station before him. Suddenly, something registered. Something made his heart start pounding against the roof of his mouth all over again. His stare settled on two figures. One was a small, thin man in a tan jacket and seated next to him was a large, bulky man dressed in a dark suit. The big man held a handkerchief to his chin. Then the small man turned around and there was no longer any doubt. The animal face looked directly at Harry and his thin, cruel lips began moving silently inside the building. The big man responded instantly and both men rushed toward the door.

Harry didn't wait to see the shapeless, battered face of the other man which had so far been averted. "Hurry, get out of here," he shouted. Quickly, he drew back into the car and slammed the door, feeling very vulnerable sitting there.

"Where do you want to go now, buddie?" asked the cabbie, casually.

"Just go, please; just go. Downtown. Take me downtown."

With agonizing slowness, the driver put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. The two men who's been waiting for Harry disappeared into the parking lot. It wasn't hard to figure that they wouldn't be far behind. Harry stared out the rear window, wondering which of the gleaming headlights behind them belonged to the deadly pair who now sought him for more than his money.

"Look, pal, it ain't none of my business but if you're in trouble maybe I can help."

Harry jumped at the chance to confide in someone. He told everything that had happened from the time he stepped off the airplane, including the exact amount of money he'd won. The tremor in his voice decreased as he talked; it seemed to lessen his peril now that another shared it.

"You'd better drop me off at a police station. That's what I should have done in the first place."

"Don't be too sure, pal," said the driver. "You know what happens then? Remember, you hurt that guy and you got no scars to show. It's your word against theirs and there's two of them. They may even claim you stole the money from them. Don't expect the casino to back up your story; they never seen you before if it comes to that. At best, you'd be held here forever and a day until they get the straight of it. Another thing, even if everything works out for you, there'd be a record then of your winnings and Uncle Sam would come a knockin' on your door for a big fat slice of the pie. I think I know a better way."

"Let's hear it."

"There's this guy I know who's a private dick, see? He's good. If he ain't busy, maybe I can get him to run you home and give you protection, too. Want me to give him a call?"

With an audible sigh of relief, Harry said, "Yes, call him, please. That's just what I need. You say he's a friend of yours?"

"Sure, this ain't the first time I brought him customers. It's a crazy town."

Somehow, it helped Harry. to know that he wasn't the only one things like this happened to and there was a way out. The cab pulled to a stop beside a pay phone set even with the curb specifically for motorists.

"Sam? This's Perry. Yeah. Listen. I got a fare who needs your help to get home. He's got a couple of mugs on his tail, you know? Great! I'm downtown now; want I should meet you at your office? Anaheim. Yeah, California."

Perry turned away from the phone and addressed Harry. "Sam says he'll have to have five hundred bucks for the trip. O.K.?"

"That's all right," said Harry. "I'll pay it."

"He says O.K. Meet you in ten minutes in front of the Bongo Club." Perry hung up the phone and, waiting his chance, swung out into the heavy traffic again.

"It's all set, pal. You ain't got a thing to worry about."

Soon after they arrived, a five-year-old Cadillac pulled in behind them. Out stepped a small, thickly built man dressed in dark trousers and a tweed sports coat. He even looks like a detective, Harry thought. He walked briskly over to the cab and bent down at the driver's window.

"How's it going, Perry?"

"Not bad, you know. But there's a guy with a problem." He indicated Harry with a nod of his head.

Sam opened the back door and motioned him to get out. "Well, let's get started. Whatever your problem is, the sooner we get out of town, the better. Right?"

Harry stepped gingerly out of the cab. His legs seemed barely able to support his weight. "I can never thank you enough for your help," he said to Perry as he supported

himself on the fender of the cab. "Here, you earned it." He handed Perry two one hundred dollar bills and hurried around to the other side of the Cadillac. He waited several minutes while Sam talked to Perry; he couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Mind if I ride up front with you?" he asked when Sam got in behind the wheel.

"No, that's fine. Now listen," he said as he manuevered the big car deftly through traffic. "It's none of my business why you're hot. All I need to know is what and who to be on the lookout for. Fill me in."

"One of them is a big bruiser with a bent-up face, an ex-boxer. The other guy is shorter than you, thin, face like a sneaky animal."

"What kind of car are they driving?" asked Sam.

"They were in a cab, just like Perry's, earlier but I don't if they're still using it or not." They were beyond the city limits now, just passing the airport where he nearly walked into the trap. They passed the field and when no car pulled out to follow, he felt absolutely safe for the first time in several hours.

"You don't have to worry," Sam said. "Even if they are still waiting for you back there, they couldn't know you were still in this particular car."

"That's right. I guess I'm pretty shook up."

"Relax," Sam urged him. "It's a long trip, nearly four hundred miles and you look pretty beat. It may help you to know I've made similar runs at least half a dozen times and I never lost a client yet."

"You can't know how great it feels to get out of there. I am just about all used up." Within five minutes, Harry was sound asleep.

"Huh? What?" Harry struggled to wake up. He rubbed his left shoulder and vaguely wondered why it hurt so. The car was stopped and as he sat erect in the seat, all he could see was desert. There didn't seem to be a road anywhere.

"I said wake up, pigeon."

Harry turned toward Sam and found himself staring into the maw of a wicked-looking black hand gun. Sam nudged him again, cruelly, in the shoulder with the barrel of the weapon.

"Out," he said impatiently.

"Where are we? What are you going . . . ?"

"Don't you know, chump?" Sam shook his head, disgustedly. "You should have stayed at home, kid. Did you really expect me to deposit you safely on your doorstep with over fourteen thousand bucks stickin' out of your pockets? You poor stooge. Move away; over there toward the gully. Fast!"

"How did you know?"

"Perry and me work together. He filled me in back there. I know the exact amount because you're such a sound sleeper."

"You'll never get away with it. Surely it isn't worth risking for only

a few thousand dollars." Harry spoke in spurts, his throat was tied up in knots of spasm.

"I've done it for a lot less, kid. As for the chances of being caught, don't worry so much about me. This desert is about as empty as any place can be. Of course, we have to come out farther now than we used to. If the public only know how many stiffs they found when they bulldozed some of those subdivisions outside town lately. Of course, that wouldn't be good for tourism so nothing ever gets out."

"Wait, there's plenty; I'll give you . . ." Harry stopped short when his hands thrust into empty pockets.

The incredibly bright desert moon seemed only a few thousand feet above the rocky, desolate ground. Every detail of the stark landscape stood out in the metalic lunar light. The crunch of the gravel under Harry's feet sounded loudly and the whole scene seemed quite unreal.

"Listen, let's stop and . . ." Harry's words were drowned out by the loud roar of the black, snub-nosed revolver Sam held leveled at his chest.

Sam approached the body and rolled it the remaining few feet to the edge of the ravine. One final kick and it skidded down into a thick tangle of sagebrush at the bottom.

"There you go, Harry; join the other lucky winners I've helped out."

THE PARADE started late, as all parades do. There was the usual confusion, with bands mustering on the wrong street corners, floats getting stuck in the traffic jam, and drum majorettes detained at the last minute by snap and elastic failures in strategic areas. There was the customary mix-up in the line of marching orders, with division captains running up and down waving their arms and blowing whistles, and the parade marshal sweating it out in his limousine and scowling at his wristwatch. And there was the usual search for visiting dignitaries, finally discovered in a nearby saloon. That was why John J. Malone was able to catch up with the parade after it had progressed only a block or two from its starting point at Michigan Boulevard and Roosevelt Road.

For the little lawyer, too, had been detained. Finding a rental out-

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A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY CRAIG RICE

the dead undertaker

Well, thought Malone as he took a swig from his hip flask, if I've got to die . . . I've picked the right place. He was surrounded by undertakers.

fit that would trust him for a frock coat, a high hat and a pair of patent leather shoes without the formality of a cash deposit was not easy on such short notice. That was the formal regalia of the Oblong Marching Society and to have appeared in anything else would have made him look conspicuous. Somewhere along the line of march one of the marchers was to slip him a list of names and one thousand dollars in cash.

"What do I have to do for the money?" Malone had asked Rico de Angelo. Rico was an undertaker, a relative of Joe of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar. "You don't have to do anything," Rico had told him on the telephone. "All you have to do is keep this guy's name out of the newspapers."

"Why?" Malone said.

Rico hesitated. Then he said, "Remember the Gerasi murder? Well, this friend of mine, he was a friend of Gerasi's too. And Gerasi gave him this list of names before he was killed. Gerasi wanted him to give the list to the cops. But when Gerasi got killed, my friend got scared. He wants *you* to take the list and give it to the cops, Malone. He wants to stay out of it."

Simple. Just a shade *too* simple, Malone told himself as he hung up the receiver. The newspapers had been running black headlines for weeks about ballot box frauds in the spring elections. Ghost voters. Names taken from the cemeteries. The cops had figured that Gerasi's Funeral Home had been supplying the names for the fraud. But Gerasi had turned honest, and passed the list on before he'd been killed. Now Malone had to get the list to the cops. But it had to be on the q. t. If the gang found out about it Malone, and Rico's friend, might both be Rico's customers.

His friends on the papers would thank him for a list like that, Malone knew, but he also knew that gangsters and crooked politicians took a dim view of informers. He would only be taking the heat off Rico's friend and putting it on himself. Still, a thousand dollars was a thousand dollars. He had a date with a blonde that night. There was also the office rent, three months overdue, with the landlord breathing down his neck. A thousand dollars would very nicely take care of both emergencies. He could depend on the boys at the city desks to keep his own name out of the papers, he assured himself. Besides, there was his duty as a lawyer to help the innocent, and this guy was an innocent party to the fraud—he hoped.

Third row from the front, fourth guy from the left, facing front, the guy with the red face and the gold tooth. That was how Rico had identified the client. Now, what with the hot Chicago sun beating down from above and the sizzling asphalt giving him the hotfoot from below, the instructions were

getting a bit fuzzy in his mind. Fourth row from the front, third guy from the left, or was it third row from the left, fourth guy from the front—no that couldn't be it. Something about facing front. He had been following the contingent. The thing to do was to hurry up ahead of it and count facing it. Malone hated walking, anywhere, any time, for any reason. Besides, his feet were killing him in the rented patent leather shoes. Maybe he shouldn't have reinforced himself quite so much from the bottle in the emergency file in his office before leaving. Under forced march he managed to get up ahead of the marchers and, turning around to face them, walking backwards, he scanned the lines. Yes, that was it. Third guy from the front facing left—Oh, the hell with it. One thing he *did* remember. Somewhere in that weaving line of faces was a red-faced guy with a gold tooth and one thousand dollars. Never look a gift horse in the mouth, Malone reminded himself. Especially one with a gold tooth.

The girls' band from Bloomington struck up with a deafening rendition of John Philip Sousa's *Washington Post March*. The particularly curvacious drum majorette doing cartwheels momentarily took Malone's mind off his work. A visiting dignitary hurrying to catch up with his place in the line of march shook Malone's hand and disappeared. Walking backwards was beginning to make him dizzy. He was about to give the whole thing up when he spied the flash of a gold tooth and quickly fell in line beside the red-faced guy, a maneuver that brought a polite "Pardon me" from the jolly little fat man he had bumped out of place, and an oath from the big, sad-faced man who reminded Malone of the hound dog Hercules he had once befriended up in Jackson County, Wisconsin, the one whose feet hurt him.

Now there was only one thing left to do. Wait for the red-faced guy on his right to slip him the fraudulent voting list and the one thousand bucks. That was to happen when the close order drill band of the Oblong Marching Society struck up, "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood," Rico de Angelo had informed him on the telephone. That was to be the signal for him to edge over to the guy with the gold tooth and receive the list and the money.

Keeping up with the steady tread of the marchers, face front, Malone stole a look out of the corner of his eye at the man with the red face. He looked the way any respectable undertaker would be expected to look. His frock coat was well tailored with an expensive Capper and Capper cut to it. His top hat was of the glossiest silk and sat well on his well-groomed head. The expression on his face was the

one every undertaker wears when the last notes of the organ music are dying away and he steps up to the coffin to invite the mourners to file past for a last look at the remains.

Solemn. Serious. But nervous. You could tell he was nervous by the too-rigid way he kept his eyes fixed ahead of him, afraid to look either to the right or to the left. Afraid to betray by so much as the flicker of an eyelash that he was even aware of Malone's sudden and unceremonious appearance in the line beside him. The sweat that glistened on his forehead might have been from the heat, but it stood out in shiny explosive little beads—fear sweat. Yes, he was scared. The red-faced man with the gold tooth was scared stiff. And he wasn't the only one. There was a feeling of tension all around him, Malone felt. It showed itself when, during a lull in the band music, the jolly little fat man on his left gave out with the first six notes of "Donna E Mobile". The big sad-faced Hercules behind him promptly squashed him with a "Shet up!" and the red-faced guy winced all over like a spastic.

Yes, there was tension in the ranks. But definitely, Malone told himself. It set him to thinking. What assurance did he have, after all, that he and the red-faced man with the gold tooth were the *only* ones in the line who knew about the incriminating list of names and the money that was about to be passed. The red-faced guy was sticking his neck out a mile, playing informer on the voting fraud gang. Where there was a neck that long there was probably an ax *somewhere* in the vicinity, waiting for a chance to strike. A cute little Colt automatic in the pocket, maybe, with the safety off. Or a shiny Smith & Wesson .38 with a sawed-off barrel, under one of these respectable frock coats. And they could be aimed straight at the red-faced guy, ready to fire the minute he made one suspicious move. Or aimed at *him,* Malone reminded himself ruefully. Either/or—or both.

You don't pick up a hot list of names and a thousand bucks easy money without putting yourself in jeopardy, the little lawyer reflected, and wiped the sweat from his brow. Who was the jeopard? The little fat guy on his left? He didn't look it, but appearances could be deceptive. Malone remembered the jolly little man in the Hanson ax-murder case on the South Side. He turned out to be the coldest, most murderous killer he had ever tangled with. Could it be the hound-faced Hercules who was marching directly behind him? There was something sad, even gentle, in the pouchy droop of his eyes. When he said, "Shet up!" to the jolly guy who wanted to sing "Donna E Mobile" it was more in sorrow than in anger. A tired, weary, beaten-down "Shet up!" rather than an angry

one. Just the same it could be either one of them. You couldn't tell about people.

No, and you couldn't tell about places, either. The middle of a street parade didn't seem like the kind of a place a gangster would pick to commit a murder. But neither did the corner of State and Madison, 'the world's busiest street corner," and yet that was where death had caught up with snuffy little Joshua Gumbrill. Right in the middle of the noon-hour rush, too. And the killer had made a clean getaway in the milling crowd.

Yes, it could happen here. And it could happen to him.

He had come away from the office unarmed, with nothing deadlier on him than a half pint of whiskey in his hip pocket. Not that he ever used it—a gun, that is—but it was always comforting to know it was there if you needed it. For that matter, the same could be said for the half pint, Malone reminded himself. He wondered if it was strictly according to the manual of close order drill or the by-laws of the Oblong Marching Society to summon liquid reinforcement in the line of march. Just then a woman fainted from the heat in the watching crowd on the sidewalk and, while all eyes were on the scene of the accident, he raised the bottle to his lips with a quick, practiced gesture that had long ago made his the most celebrated elbow at Joe the Angel's City Hall bar.

It was a good thing he had fortified himself in time, for it wasn't two minutes later, at the intersection of Michigan Boulevard and Randolph Street to be exact, that the band leader of the Oblong Marching Society blew a shrill blast on his whistle and the band struck up:

"How much wood could a woodchuck chuck
If a woodchuck could chuck wood."

Malone sidled over slowly toward the red-faced guy on his right, ready for the pass that was to deliver the list of names and the money into his hand. Then something happened that wasn't on the program. The girls' band from Bloomington just behind them gave out simultaneously with:

'Oh, the monkey wrapped his tail around the flagpole."

The resulting disharmony and din threw the whole column out of step. Everybody stopped and turned to scowl at the bunglers. Instinctively Malone turned too. When he turned back again the red-faced man was no longer beside him. For a second Malone stared about him, bewildered. Then he looked down and saw that the man had collapsed on the street.

He lay on his back and he was gasping for breath. Immediately the marchers closed around him.

"Give him air," somebody shouted. "Can't you see the man's fainted?"

The parade came to a dead stop as the marchers carried their fellow member off the street, through the crowd and into the lobby of the corner building. He was still gasping for breath as they laid him down on the floor, fanning him with their top hats and debating excitedly about the best way to handle a case of sunstroke. By the time the police shouldered their way through the crowd he had stopped fighting for breath and lay quite still. Too still, Malone thought. He knelt down and reached for the man's wrist to feel his pulse. As he did so he heard a familiar voice behind him.

It was Captain Daniel von Flanagan of the Homicide Division.

"Well, if it isn't John J. Malone, attorney and counselor at law. And since when, may I ask, have the undertakers been taking lawyers into membership?'

"*Honorary* membership," Malone began lamely, and then, "Don't ask foolish questions, von Flanagan. A man's fainted from the heat and we've got to get him into an ambulance."

Von Flanagan bent down and felt the man's pulse. Then he turned.

"Fainted, did you say? Fainted from the heat? Malone, this man is dead."

"Heart failure," someone in the crowd said, and for a moment Malone was almost prepared to believe it. That red face. The way he had gasped for breath.

Von Flanagan turned the man over on his stomach. A wet patch was spreading over the black broadcloth of his frock coat. The stone floor where he had lain was wet too. And bright red. Von Flanagan pulled the coat up over the dead man's head and ripped off his shirt. In the middle of his back below the shoulder blades and a little to the left was a neat bullet hole.

"Drilled through the heart," von Flanagan said. He rose and looked around him at the frock-coated brethren.

"Didn't anyone hear a shot?" he demanded.

They looked at one another in dumb amazement, shaking their heads.

"I was right next to him," Malone said. "I didn't hear any shot."

But this time the lobby was crawling with cops.

"Nobody leaves here till I say the word," von Flanagan called out to them. "And you, Malone, I want to have a word with you. In private."

Malone followed von Flanagan to the storeroom behind the lobby cigar counter. The Captain's face was red with a hot Irish anger. His eyes narrowed as he looked down at the little lawyer.

"Malone, what do *you* know about this? I'm putting you all under arrest. You and this whole Oblong Marching outfit. I'll sweat it out of you if I have to—"

"If you'll take the advice of an old friend," Malone said, "you'll let the

parade proceed as scheduled, without another minute's delay. You'll order every member of the Oblong Marching Society to take his place in line just exactly where he was before this thing happened. First, though, I want your permission to go through the dead man's pockets."

"What for?"

"I've got my reasons, but I can't tell you now," Malone said. "There isn't time. You want to catch the killer, don't you?"

"Somebody drilled him from behind," von Flanagan said. "All I want to know is, who was marching directly behind this guy? What I can't figure is why didn't anybody hear the shot?"

"The noise," Malone said. "The bands got their signals mixed and two of them started up the same time. You could have shot off a cannon and everybody would have thought it was part of the program. Now, if you'll order the members back into some sort of formation—"

"Maybe you've got something there," von Flanagan said. "And the minute I see who the guy is that was marching behind the murdered man I'll order him searched and put under arrest at once."

Malone said, "Listen to me, von Flanagan. You won't do anything of the kind. If he committed one murder he won't hesitate to commit a second murder—this time to wipe out the evidence of the first murder. He'll try to shoot his way out —and innocent people are going to get hurt."

"Wait a minute, Malone."

"I'll point some buy out to you," Malone said. "You'll put the guy under arrest in full view of the whole crowd. Then you'll order the rest of them back into line and let the parade go on. After you take the suspect into custody you and your boys will do a fake vanishing act. Stay out of sight but not too far out of reach. I might need your help. When the killer starts shooting . . ."

The captain's face lighted up with its first faint ray of understanding. Then he shook his head. "No. No, Malone, I can't let you do it. No friend of mine is going to make a clay pigeon out of himself."

But the Captain quickly let the little lawyer talk him into it. Too quickly, for such a devoted friend, Malone thought afterwards.

Back in the lobby again Malone went through the dead man's pockets looking for the hot list and the money. There wasn't a sign of anything like a list anywhere on his person. The only money was a few crumpled bills in his pants pocket. Could it be that the killer had murdered the wrong man? Or had the red-faced guy been scared out of the deal at the last minute?

He rose to his feet, hiding his disappointment and confusion behind a mask of smiling confidence.

"There's your man," he told von Flanagan, and pointed to a bewil-

derde, professional guy in the crowd. The others fell back in amazement as von Flanagan's cops clapped handcuffs on the man and went off with him.

Von Flanagan addressed himself to the crowd.

"Now I want everyone of you to fall in line again, just the way you were before this happened."

They filed out of the lobby and took their places in the parade again. Malone noted that his high hat lay on the street, a battered mess, where the marchers had trampled it underfoot in the excitement. He wondered how much that was going to set him back with the rental people. Beside it lay the dead man's hat. It had miraculously escaped being stepped on. Malone picked it up and put it gingerly on his head. It didn't quite fit, but he figured it would have to do. He wondered if the rental people would accept the substitution.

At a signal from von Flanagan the band leader blew his whistle and the band struck up "The Stars and Stripes Forever." The parade began to move once more up Michigan Avenue. Murder marches on, Malone muttered to himself as he looked uneasily to his right at the vacant spot where only a little while before the red-faced man with the gold tooth had been marching beside him.

He stole a backward glance at the man who was marching behind the vacant spot, and wondered why he hadn't noticed him before. Then the reason dawned on him. Who would figure the fat man for a killer? A jolly little guy singing "Donna E Mobile." That was why the gang had picked him, Malone realized—he looked like anything but a killer. But if the little fat guy had committed the crime it was going to be hard to convince a jury of it, unless he was taken *in flagrante delicto* with the murder weapon still smoking in his hand.

That was precisely what he had let himself in for, the little lawyer reflected ruefully. A sitting—or rather, a marching—duck. A waddling duck—his feet were killing him, and the dead man's hat sat on his head like a tin can on a post. A perfect target for a pot shot, if the fat man happened to miss this time. If he didn't miss, if his aim was as good on the second try as it was on the first, then he, John J. Malone, attorney and coussellor at law, was a dead duck.

It was a sobering thought and the last thing he wanted just now was sobering thoughts. He reached into his hip pocket and brought out the reinforcing fluid. Let the members of the Oblong Marching Society, and the million spectators along the line of march, too, for that matter, think what they pleased of an undertaker taking a drop of liquid nourishment in public. He was damned if he was going to die of thirst just to uphold the reputation of the undertaking profession.

The band struck up a Sousa march and Malone, in an effort to add further support to his drooping spirits, raised his voice in song.

"Be kind to your flatfooted friends,
For a duck may be somebody's mother,
They live in deep marshes and fens,
Where it's damp—"

"Shet up!" said the sad-eyed Hercules behind him.

"What's the matter with my singing?" Malone replied without turning around.

"It stinks," said the sad-eyed man.

Malone decided that the man had no ear for music.

The Oblong Marching Society. The name was probably meant to suggest the shape of a hearse. Or was it a coffin? He dismissed the thought from his mind. This was no time to be thinking of hearses or coffins.

When was it going to happen? Was the killer going to fall for the decoy? He was probably weighing his chances right now. He had killed one man and he probably had the murder weapon on him this very minute. What would he have to lose if he killed a second man? They couldn't kill *him* twice. And there was always the chance that he could make a get-away in the excitement. So far as *he* knew the incriminating list was now on the person of John J. Malone, who had searched the dead man. Malone had even taken the precaution to "palm" the papers as he was searching the red-faced guy, just in case the killer was watching him, which he probably was. In short, he had done everything he could to put himself on the spot for anybody intent on obtaining possession of the hot list.

If that was what the killer was after—and what else could it be?—he was certainly a desperate man to be taking such chances right out in the open. Only one thing could explain it. He was one of the gang of racketeers who had muscled into the Oblong Marching Society as a source of cemetery names with which to help the crooked politicians stuff the ballot boxes. They were probably using the Society, too, as a respectable front for plenty of other rackets. Obviously the killer had been hand-picked by the mob as the fall guy for this dangerous assignment. His orders were "Get those papers, or else." He was right smack between the blue-barreled service automatics of von Flanagan's boys and the sawed-off shotguns of the mob.

Malone was almost sorry for the guy. He was even a bit sorry for himself. Where *were* von Flanagan's boys? He had warned the Captain to keep his man out of sight but not out of reach. Marching with measured tread to the music of the band—a bit unsteadily now, to be sure—he was listening for the reassuring purr of police motorcycles. He told himself he

could hear them, ever so faintly, in the distance. He hoped, not too far distant.

He was lost in these reveries when suddenly the drum and bugle corps of V.F.W. Post No. 9 just up ahead broke into:

"How much wood could a woodchuck chuck
If a woodchuck could chuck wood."

This is it! Malone told himself. The next instant he felt himself pushed from behind and when he looked up from the asphalt the scene that met his eyes was one of pure pandemonium, uncut and unrefined. The jolly little fat man was struggling in the grip of a dozen arms and von Flanagan's cops were converging from all sides with sirens moaning, cut-outs blasting the air like jet fighters. In less time than it takes to tell it the culprit was in handcuffs and being led away to the waiting squad cars.

"You did it," von Flanagan told Malone. "You did it and the department owes you an apology for ever suspecting—"

"The department owes me more than an apology," Malone said. He examined the silk topper. It had a bullet hole on each side of it. "How much," he asked, 'do you think it's going to cost me to replace one of these things?"

Von Flanagan shrugged and, after a congratulatory handshake, took his departure with the squad car. Malone was left holding the hat. He looked up at the sad-eyed Hercules whose shove from behind had pushed him in the nick of time out of harm's way.

"I owe my life to you," he said. "Do you mind if I buy you a drink?"

Ten minutes later at Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar the little lawyer sat brooding, head in hand, on the turn of events that had left him with nothing to show for his pains but a bullet-pierced high silk hat that he would have to pay for when he returned the outfit to the rental people. No hot list. No thousand dollars. Two tired feet that felt like half-raw, quick-fried beef in the tight patent-leather rented shoes. And a headache from the dead man's ill-fitting hat.

The sad-eyed guy wasn't proving to be much of a help either, sitting there and staring moodily into his beer. Malone ordered up another double rye. He turned to the sad-eyed one and said for the dozenth time, "I owe my life to you. Can I buy you another beer?"

The dour one shook his head.

"You don't owe me nothin'," he said sourly.

This was a hell of a note. A guy saves your life and when you offer to buy him a drink he insults you by ordering one beer and refusing a refill. This was one more frustration in a day that had been nothing but frustrations. This was the last straw.

"Bring this guy a double rye," he

said to Joe the Angel. "Give him *two* double ryes, Joe. And a beer chaser."

"In your hat," said the sad-eyed one.

"Nobody talks like this to my friend Malone," Joe the Angel said.

Malone said, "You keep out of this, Joe. I owe my life to this man. The least I can do is buy him a drink."

"Then let him drink up," Joe the Angel said. He set down two glasses on the bar and poured two double ryes. And a beer chaser.

"Down the hatch," Malone said, raising his own glass.

"In your hat," said Hercules.

Joe the Angel reached for the bung-starter, but Malone stopped him with an imperious wave of the hand.

"An insult is an insult, friend or no friend," he said to the dour one. He was beginning to feel the heartening effects of the rye. "Now, if you'll oblige me by stepping outside we can settle this thing like gentlemen."

The sad-eyed one lifted himself off the bar stool and started for the door. Malone donned the silk topper and followed him outside.

At the first passage of arms Malone found himself sprawling on the sidewalk. Beside him lay the silk hat, a shapeless mess.

"In your hat," said the dour one, and stalked off.

Before Malone could get to his feet the sad-eyed Hercules had disappeared in the sidewalk crowd.

Malone picked up the battered topper and as he did so his fingers encountered something bulging in the hat-band. He reached in and pulled out a sheaf of carefully folded sheets. They were covered on both sides with close-packed single-space names. He dived into the hat-band and this time he came up with a little sheaf of crisp hundred dollar bills. He counted them. Ten.

For a second, it didn't register. Then he got it. Hercules had been a friend of the murdered man. Hercules had known all about the list—and he'd known where it had been hidden. He'd known about Malone, too, and he had been telling Malone everything the lawyer needed to know about the list and the money. It was all cleared up now.

Malone considered chasing the sad-eyed man, but decided against it. Hercules would want no publicity, and very probably no thanks. The way he'd look at it, he'd only have been doing his job. Helping out a friend.

Besides, Malone told himself, Hercules would be too far away by now.

The little lawyer shrugged. He'd had the money with him all the time—and never known it.

"In your hat," Malone told himself. He put the crumpled topper on his head, and went back to the bar.

The Cool One

BY GEORGE ANTONICH

All they needed was the murder weapon . . . then they'd have their culprit on ice.

Johnson's patio sparkled in bright morning sunlight, giddy splashes of color rising from green and ivory lawn furniture around a smouldering barbecue pit. Beside a fragrant towering magnolia tree stood a washtub filled with cans of beer and cola. He had only to bring in the cake of ice from his car and all would be ready for the late Sunday morning brunch.

Claude Johnson dabbed at quick-forming beads of sweat on his forehead and peered anxiously at his wristwatch. Faye, his wife, was not yet home. She had been gone all night.

Claude swallowed nervously. Mr. Adams, his boss, was due inside the hour. With Adams would be his wife, Matilda, and their three small children. For the thousandth time, Claude wished fervently that Faye's mother could be cured of the recurring heart murmur that forced her to make such demands on Faye's time. This was the sixth night his wife had spent with her mother in the past month.

At two minutes past ten he heard a car door slam in the paved driveway, and moments later Faye appeared at the side gate. Claude wiped the sweat from his face and hurried forward to kiss her as she came into the yard.

"Good morning, darling," he said.

"Hi," Faye mumbled.

Claude left the gate ajar so he could bring in the ice. But first he went to the grilled barbecue pit and poured a mug of steaming liquid from a blackened coffee pot. One thing he'd learned in his two years with Faye—she was a bitch-on-

wheels until she'd had her first morning cup of coffee!

He offered it to her, his soft gray eyes feeding on the petite black-haired beauty before him, amazed that a creature of such stunning loveliness had married him; that those high-rising breasts and full inviting hips were his alone. Claude shivered from a warm-cold wave of love and pride just watching her. The way she moved, with sleek catlike grace; mysterious yet elemental; all woman—and all his!

"Did you have a rough night?" he asked.

"Yes," Faye said. "It was one hell of a night!" She sipped from the mug and made a wry face. "God, this stuff is horrible When did you make it, last night?"

"No, darling. It's fresh."

"It tastes like warmed-over urine! Is there a real drink around here?"

"There's nothing but beer."

She stood up, deliberately splashing the coffee to the concrete walk, and started toward the washtub.

"Let me get it for you, darling," Claude insisted. "You must be worn out." He tore off the metal tab and handed the can of beer to her.

"Ugh!" Faye spat, tasting. "This is hotter than that damned coffee!"

"I've got ice in the car. I was just about to go get it."

"No, Claude—stay for a minute." Faye sat on the edge of the chaise and crossed her legs. Claude's eyes noted the crooked seams and a runner snaking toward her ankle. Then a path of creamy flesh showed above one stocking and Claude, gulping, knelt before her on the concrete.

"Oh, darling, I missed you so last night! I was almost crazy with loneliness. I love you so!"

Faye pushed his hands away from her knees. "For God's sake, Claude, must you paw at me so early in the day!" She lifted the can of beer and threw it against the tall fence that enclosed the yard in complete privacy.

"I'll get the ice," Claude said hurriedly. "It won't take me a minute!"

"Claude, wait—!"

But he was already in the driveway, eager hands opening the rear deck, tearing away the burlap sack covering the piece of ice. He lifted the twenty-five pounds easily and came back with it in his bare hands. "It won't be long at all—" he began.

"Claude! For the love of Christ, *will you listen to me!*"

He stood before her, shocked at the tone of her voice. "What is it, Faye? What's wrong, darling?"

"Everything's wrong, Claude. I can't go on like this any longer!"

"I know, dear. It's been rough on you. But perhaps your mother will improve—"

"Oh, Claude, you damned fool! I haven't been going to my mother's. She's as healthy as a cow!"

"Then what—?"

"I'm leaving you, Claude. I can't take another day of this dull life. I can't stand your stupid boss and his

horse-faced wife, or those snotty-nosed brats. I can't stand you! I can't bear to have you even touch me!"

"Faye, darling—what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I've found myself a real man! All the times you thought I was with mother, I've been with him. I just came from his bed. I want to be with him every minute of every day. He makes me feel like a woman, Claude. I'd sell my soul in hell for him!"

Claude felt a chilling numbness. "You can't do this to me, Faye. My God, after all I've given you! This house, the car, anything you've ever wanted. I've gone in debt up to my ears to satisfy you."

"Satisfy me? Ha!" Her laughter pricked at him, thorny with sarcasm. "You clumsy little pipsqueak, you couldn't satisfy any woman—especially a real woman like me! I've loathed every moment with you. Why, you're not even a whole man, you inept, fumbling idiot . . ."

They were the last words that Faye Johnson's rasping voice ever screeched. Moving in an aura of quiet rage, deliberately conscious of what he was doing. Claude lifted the cake of ice high above his head and brought it *thoomping* down against her skull.

With a sickening crunch Faye slumped and fell across the chaise. Claude watched her crumple, feeling detached, as if he were viewing the late-late show.

It was several moments before he became aware of the slab of ice, miraculously unbroken, in his hands. Very calmly he went to the washtub and put it down, arranging cans of beer and cola against it.

When he turned again, Faye's body had slumped from the chaise, her print skirt hiking up past the tops of her stockings. Before her body settled the dress was almost up to her waist. Claude winced. There was something obscene about the grotesque looseness of her. He walked over and wrestled the still warm flesh back onto the chaise. As he did his eyes widened, noting the pink monogrammed panties. They were on backwards! The slut, he thought grimly. The dirty rotten slut! Torturing himself, he visualized her frantic rush to get dressed and come slinking home to him. Savagely he clutched at the panties and ripped them from her body. Then, sobbing, he ran into the house.

In the kitchen he gulped two glasses of cold water and wished there were something stronger in the house. Almost without conscious thought he placed the glass carefully down, moved to the front door, and walked two blocks to the liquor store.

"Good morning, Mr. Johnson. You're up early this morning!"

"Hello, Syl." Claude forced a wide grin. "I've been up for hours. The boss and his family are coming over."

"Again? Then you'll need more beer?"

Claude shook his head. "No, I have plenty. I want something for Faye. Poor kid, she was up all night with her sick mother. She really needs a pick-me-up, believe me!"

"What did you have in mind, Mr. Johnson?"

"I don't know, Syl. We're not much for liquor in our house. What do you recommend?"

"For that tired, rundown feeling? My recipe is a handful of aspirin and several large Bloody Marys. That's Vodka and tomato juice."

"Say, that sounds great! Faye loves tomato juice. All right, put together whatever you think I'll need."

Syl placed the brown paper bag on the counter. "Will that be all, Mr. Johnson?"

Claude glanced around the store. "How about some of that fancy-pack dried fruit? Faye loves that!"

Grinning, Syl said, "You make us ordinary husbands look bad, Mr. Johnson. My wife would faint dead away if I brought home a present without some special reason. You're going to spoil that woman of yours!"

Claude smiled. "I doubt that," he said. "Faye deserved everything I've given her—everything!"

Walking home he fought to control his impulse to run. He stopped to chat with Mr. Trafton trimming his hedge, and made a one-handed catch of a football young Tommy Dicks threw at him.

When he reached the house he walked up the driveway to the rear gate. He opened it and stepped inside calling, "Faye! Faye, darling, I'm back!"

His darting eyes found her then, sprawled hideously on the lawn chaise, the dress up to her waist, her lower body exposed. He dropped the package and heard the tinkle of broken glass.

"Faye!" The cry was a strangled gasp. "Faye, darling!"

He knelt for a full two minutes, feeling for a non-existent pulse, before he went in to call the police.

Then he sat down to wait.

"Good God!" Detective Sergeant Bridges flinched and covered Faye's head with a sheet. "I've seen some cracked skulls in my time, but this—! Whoever did it must have used a sledgehammer!"

"Doc says it was a smooth, blunt instrument," the younger cop said. "Whatever it was, it was mighty damned heavy! No rape-killer is going to be lugging it around with him. It's bound to be around here somewhere."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Bridges warned. "We don't *know* it was a rape-killer."

From inside the house where he had gone to call his boss, Claude listened and watched. Bridges was, he thought, the perfect movie-type cop; bull-shouldered, thick-necked, with a pugilist's face that couldn't hide keen, analytical eyes.

"You don't think the husband did it?" the young cop asked. "For Christ's sake, Matt, he's married to her. Why would he rip off her pants to get to her? And why all the bruises and teeth marks on her breasts?"

"Maybe," Bridges said dryly, "he's a passionate mother. These meek little bank tellers can fool you."

"I don't buy that, Matt. Besides, I checked with the liquor store owner. He says Johnson was crazy about his wife. He couldn't do enough for her."

"Or to her!" Bridges snapped. "Look, we checked with her old lady. She didn't spend the night there. Suppose Johnson found out she was chippying on him and blew his stack?"

The young cop shook his head. "I still don't buy it. Doc says she's had sexual intercourse recently, and he found traces of skin under her fingernails. Whoever got into her pants also got marked up in the process."

"Did you check Johnson?"

"Right down to his drawers. Not a scratch on him!"

Matt Bridges shrugged. "I just can't see a rapist prowling the streets this early. If it happened at night I could go for it. But on Sunday morning—?"

The young cop said, "The way I see it, Johnson's wife had herself a date last night. Maybe she was just out for laughs. Maybe she didn't want to go all the way. She stayed all night with this joker and teased him half out of his mind. When he saw Johnson leave for the liquor store he came in and took what she'd been holding back."

"Could be," Bridges agreed. "But what did he use on her? We've checked the house and garage. There's nothing here that fits the murder weapon. Can you see some scared punk who's just killed a dame taking it with him? No! It's got to be around here somewhere. We find the murder weapon and we're next to finding the killer."

"We'll find it, Matt. I like this Johnson. I want to prove him innocent. I can't say I'd blame him if he did knock her off. From what we've learned, she was a two-timing bitch!"

"She was that!" Bridges agreed.

Claude came out to watch as white-clad men took Faye's body away in a wicker basket. When they were gone, Bridges asked him to go over his story again.

"It beats the hell out me," Bridges said finally. "I know there's something here—something vital to this case. If I could just put my finger on it!"

For a wild moment Claude Johnson considered telling Bridges the whole truth, admitting everything and taking his medicine. But why should he, he thought angrily? Hadn't he paid enough already? Wasn't the thought of Faye in another man's arms punishment enough? He realized suddenly that he would be doing penance for the

rest of his life. But he would do it on the outside, free and clear, and perhaps—someday—he would find the right girl and try again.

He felt he had that much coming.

"Do you mind if I have a beer?" he asked. "I feel pretty shaken up."

Bridges nodded. "You've held up just fine. You're a cool one."

Claude opened a can of beer. It was warm and bitter in his mouth. "Would you gentlemen like something to drink?"

"Not on duty!" Bridges snapped.

"There's some cola here," Claude offered.

"Okay," Bridges said, nodding. "Make it two."

Claude opened the cans and brought them to the policemen. "I just want you to know," he said, "that I have the utmost confidence in you men. I know you'll catch the fiend who did this."

Bridges grunted. He lifted the can of cola and drank. "Damn!" he muttered, "this is warm!"

He got up and walked over to the washtub, staring down at the contents. Then he straightened abruptly. "That ice!" he said sharply.

Claude felt his heart leap. Sweat broke out, tingling like electric charges on his forehead. His mouth burned hot and dry, and the sudden droop of his shoulders was almost audible. *Damn that keen-eyed Bridges! Damn! Damn! Damn!*

"What about the ice?" Claude asked.

"Hell, man, it'll never cool anything in a chunk like that!" From his pocket Bridges brought out a knife. "To get maximum cooling it should be broken up." He stabbed at the ice, breaking it into tiny slivers.

When he finished, Bridges straightened and put down the cola. "I'll drink it later," he said. "Right now I think we'd better have another look around. That damned murder weapon has got to be around here somewhere!"

Claude Johnson gulped. "I'm sure," he said, rounded eyes glued on the washtub, "that you'll find it."

He almost added, "After all, it couldn't just melt away!"

Circumstantial evidence is not adequate to convict . . . but sometimes it can be awfully convincing.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY
HUNT COLLINS

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It was Harley's wife who called me. I remember hearing the phone ringing, and then Anne nudged me and said, "You'd better get that, hon."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and turned on the lamp on the end table. The clock read two-thirty.

"Now, who the hell is that?" I said to Anne.

"Answer it," she said. "That's the best way to find out."

I made some crack about early morning humor and then walked out into the hallway. I went down the steps, and the phone kept clamoring. When I reached it, I snatched the receiver from the cradle.

"Hello," I said, perhaps a bit too gruffly.

"Dave?" the voice asked. It was hurried and almost frantic.

"Yes," I said. "Who's this?"

"Marcia. Dave, Harleys in trouble."

I was still half-asleep. *"Who?"* I asked.

"Harley, my husband," she said. "The police . . . our sitter . . ."

"Pull yourself together, Marcia. What kind of trouble?"

"They . . . they say he killed our baby sitter. Dave . . ."

"What?"

"Yes, yes. Dave, they've taken him away. He asked me to call you. He . . ."

"Where'd they take him?"

"To the sheriff's office, Dave. It's all so crazy. He . . . he couldn't have done a thing like that, Dave. You know that. He . . ."

"Of course I know." I was wide awake now. "I'll get right down there, Marcia. Now don't you worry. I'll go right down."

"Thank you, Dave. Thank you so much."

"I'll want to hurry now. I'll call you later."

"All right, Dave. Thank you."

I hung up and went upstairs and started to dress. Anne sat up in bed and said, "Where are you going?"

"Down to the sheriff's office. They're holding Harley there. They say he killed his baby sitter."

"Oh, that's absurd," Anne said.

"I know. But they seem to be serious about it."

"Well, my God," Anne said.

I finished dressing, and then I dusted a little talc over the two-thirty A.M. shadow on my chin. I went back into the bedroom, kissed Anne, and said, "I won't be long, honey."

"All right," she said. "Be careful."

I went out into the hallway and opened the door to Beth's room. She was sixteen, but she still kicked the covers off every night. I tiptoed in, covered her, and then kissed her lightly on the check, the way I'd been doing ever since she was born. Then I went down and got the car out of the garage.

When I arrived at the sheriff's office, the sheriff himself greeted me. He told me Harley wasn't allowed any visitors, but I told him I was Harley's lawyer, and he said I could have a few minutes. He led me to the back of the building, unlocked a barred door leading to the cellblock, and brought me to Harley's cell.

Harley said nothing until the sheriff was gone. Then he came to me and squeezed my hand tightly. "Dave, thank God you're here," he said. He was a thin man, with hair greying at the temples. His eyes were grey, and he was thin-lipped and high-checked, and I guess I'd known him for more than three years now.

"What's it all about?" I asked. I offered him a cigarette, which he took gratefully and lighted hurriedly. He let out a great puff of smoke and said, "Dave, they're trying to play me for a sucker."

"How so?"

He drew in on the cigarette again. "This kid tonight. The pressure is probably on from upstairs someplace, and they're trying to hang it on the most convenient sucker. That happens to be me."

"All right, suppose you tell it from the beginning."

Harley nodded. "Sure. Sure." He let out a deep sigh, as if he'd already told the story too many times already. "Marcia and I went out tonight. Nothing special. A movie and a few drinks afterwards. To be exact, we had three martinis each."

"All right, go on."

"We got home at about midnight. This kid who was sitting for us—Sheila Kane—a nice kid we always use, she was sleeping on the couch when we came in. Marcia woke her, and I paid her and then took her out to the car. She lives on the other end of town, Dave. I always drive her home."

"Go on."

"I took her straight home. I dropped her off at her house, and then took off. I stopped in a bar to buy a package of cigarettes. Then I went home." He paused and sucked in a deep breath. "An hour later, the cops were pounding on my door. They said the kid had been raped and strangled. Her parents told them she'd been sitting for us."

"I don't understand," I said. "How do they tie that to you?"

"My cigarette lighter. They found it near her body."

I looked at Harley steadily. "How come?" I asked.

"The kid smokes," he said, shrugging wearily. "Hell, Dave, she's all of eighteen. She lighted up in the car when I was taking her home. I gave her my lighter. I guess she forgot to return it."

"This bar you went into later, for cigarettes. Did anyone see you?"

"I don't think so. It was one of these places that have a small floor show. The show was on when I went in, and no one was paying attention to who came and went. I got the cigarettes from a machine just inside the door. Then I left."

"When you took the girl home, did you wait for her to go inside before you left?" I asked.

Harley puffed on his cigarette, trying to remember. "No," he said at last.

"Do you usually?"

"Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. I was tired, Dave. I wanted to get home. Hell, who knew anything like this was going to happen?"

"Where'd they find the girl?"

"In a dark street a few blocks from her home. They figure she was thrown out of a car."

"And your lighter?"

"Alongside her in the road. They say I dropped it when I threw her out. Good God, Dave, can't you see they're trying to sucker me?"

"It looks that way," I said. I wish someone had seen you in that bar, though."

"The hell with the bar. I wasn't gone more than fifteen minutes. It takes about five minutes to get the girl home, and another five coming back. Jesus, Dave, I couldn't have even if I'd wanted to."

"Does anyone beside Marcia know you were gone only fifteen minutes?"

Harley shook his head. "*She* doesn't even know, Dave. She was asleep when I got home."

"And they've booked you on suspicion?"

"Yes," Harley said miserably. "I'm their big sucker."

"Don't worry," I said. "Maybe we can work something out."

It was one of the hardest trials I've ever fought. The district attorney swung it so that the jury was almost all women. If there's anything a woman hates and despises, it's a rapist—so I had nine strikes against me to begin with. The other three jury members were men.

The trial went for five days, with the DA pulling every trick in the book. He paraded all the circumstantial evidence, and he did it so well that every member of that jury could have sworn they'd all been eye witnesses to the rape and murder.

When he got Harley on the stand, Harley told the same story he'd told me. He told it simply and plainly, and the jury and the assembled spectators listened in silence. Then I began to question him.

"How old are you, Mr. Pearce?" I asked.

"Forty-two," Harley said.

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any children?"

"Yes."

"How many, Mr. Pearce?"

"Two. A boy and a girl."

"How old are they?"

"The boy is seven. The girl is five."

"Did you engage the dead Sheila Kane to stay with these children while you and Mrs. Pearce went out for the evening?"

"Yes."

"Was this a customary practice of yours?"

"Yes."

"How many times had you engaged Miss Kane previous to the night of her death?"

"We'd been using her on and off for about a year."

"And nothing ever happened to her before this night," "I said. "Nothing . . ."

"Objection!" the DA snapped. "Counsel for the defense is attempting to establish . . ."

"Sustained," the judge said wearily.

"Would you tell the court what Miss Kane looked like, please?"

Harley hesitated. "I . . . well, she was blonde."

"Yes?"

"Blue eyes, I think. I don't really remember."

"Short or tall?"

"Medium, I suppose."

"Glasses?"

"No. No glasses."

"What was her address?"

"I don't know. I drove by memory, I suppose. She showed me the first time, and then I just went there from memory every other time."

"Did you call her 'Sheila,' Mr. Peace?"

"Yes, of course."

"And what did she call you?"

"Mr. Pearce."

"Thank you, that will be all."

The DA stared at me, and then he shrugged. I suppose he wondered what I was trying to do. It was so simple that it probably evaded him. I was simply trying to show that no lust had ever crossed Harley Pearce's

mind or heart. He couldn't even describe the dead girl well. He did not know her address. They maintained a strictly adult to adolescent relationship. Sheila and *Mr.* Pearce.

The DA called his next witness, the bartender at the *Flamingo,* the bar Harley had stopped at to buy his cigarettes. The bartender said he always watched the door during the floorshow. He'd known of a lot of bars that had been held up during floorshows, when no one was paying attention to the bar or the cash register. So he always kept a close watch, and he'd have noticed anyone who came in that night. He had not seen Harley Pearce enter. The DA smiled and turned the man over to me.

"What time does the floorshow start at the *Flamingo?"* I asked.

"Ten minutes to twelve, sir," he said.

"Do you serve many drinks while the floorshow is on?"

"No, sir. Most everyone is at their tables, watching the show."

"And are we to understand that you keep a constant watch on the door during that time? I mean, since you are not serving drinks."

"Objection," the DA said, rising.

"Overruled," the judge answered. "Proceed."

"Is that what you do during the show?" I repeated.

"Well . . . I guess I look at the show, too. On and off, I mean. But I watch the door mostly. A lot of robberies . . ."

"Watch the cigarette machine?"

"Well, no, sir."

"Then it is likely that someone did enter, stop at the machine, and leave, all while you were taking one of your periodic looks at the show?"

"Well . . ."

"Did you see me standing at the bar that night?"

The bartender blinked his eyes. "You, sir?"

"Yes, me. Standing near the blonde in the mink stole. I was drinking a Tom Collins when the show started. Did you see me?"

"I . . . I don't recall, sir. I mean . . ."

"I was there! Did you see me?"

"Objection" the DA said. "Counsel for the defense is perjuring . . ."

"Did you see me?"

"Near . . . near the blonde, sir?"

"Yes, near the blonde. Did you or didn't you?"

"Well, there was a blonde, and if you say you was standing near her . . . I mean, I don't remember, but . . ."

"Then you *did* see me?"

"I . . . I don't remember, sir."

"I wasn't there! But if you couldn't remember whether I was or not, how can you remember whether or not Mr. Pearce came in for a package of cigarettes especially when—by your own admission—you could have been watching the floorshow at that time?"

"I . . ."

"That's all," I said.

I heard the murmurs in the court-

room, and I knew I'd done well. I'd punctured one part of the DA's case, and the jury was now thinking if he was wrong there, why can't he be wrong elsewhere, too? Why couldn't Harley have loaned the girl his cigarette lighter? Why couldn't his story be absolutely true? After all, the DA's case was purely circumstantial.

I clinched it in the summing up. I painted Harley as an upstanding citizen, a man who—just as you and I—was a good husband and a good father. A man who hired a baby sitter, the same sitter he'd been hiring for the past year, went out to a quiet movie, had a few drinks with his wie, and then came home. He drove the sitter to her house, dropped her off, and then went back to his wife. Someone had attacked her after he'd gone. But not Harley. Not the man sitting there, I told them, not the man who could be your own brother or your own husband, not him.

The jury was out for half an hour. When they returned, they brought me a verdict of Not Guilty.

We celebrated that night. Harley and Marcia came over while his mother-in-law sat with their kids. We laughed and drank and Harley kept saying, "They were looking for a sucker, Dave. But you showed them. By Christ, you showed them you can't fool with an innocent man."

He told me I was the best goddamn lawyer in the whole goddamn world, and then he started a round of songs, and we all joined in, drinking all the while. The party was doing quite well when Beth walked in.

She'd had a date with one of the neighborhood boys. She said hello to Marcia and Harley when we stopped singing, and then excused herself and started up the steps to her room.

"How old is she now, Dave?" Harley asked.

"Sixteen," I said.

"A lovely girl," he said, very softly.

I'd been watching Beth climb the steps, watching her proudly. She was still my little girl, but she was ripening into womanhood quickly. I turned to look at Harley.

His eyes were on Beth, too. He watched her legs as she walked higher and higher up the staircase, and then his eyes traveled the length of her body, slowly, methodically.

He did not take his eyes from her until she'd opened the door to her own room and stepped out of view. Then he said: "What'll we sing next, folks?"

I looked at Harley, and then I looked at the empty staircase, and I suddenly felt very foolish inside, very foolish and very naive. Naive and tremendously stupid.

I felt exactly like what Harley would have called a "sucker."

And there was, of course, nothing I could do.

I did not join in the next song.

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She was his wife. In his way, he loved her . . . and hated her lover.

TWO-SIDED TRIANGLE

BY LARRY DANE

"Hurricane weather ahead!" That's all he had said, simply, tritely in that dry, nasal voice Pettibone was cursed with. Sitting at the tiny square of a breakfast table with the battered formica top, sipping his orange juice, pretending to read the weather report, dreading the new onslaught of Margaret's temper. "Hurricane weather ahead."

She exploded before the prediction was out of his mouth, and the storm center moved into the cramped kitchenette, wild and ringing, bouncing off the midget appliances and the tinny off-white cabinets. "I couldn't believe my ears!" Then more slowly and an octave higher, "I just couldn't believe my ears!" This was her favorite cliche, as identifiable a trademark as the NBC peacock.

She stood like a Valkyrie in her quilted satin robe, and Pettibone had to admit to himself she was still a beautiful woman when she was angry. That was all the time. Tall and dark with great, snapping blue eyes and a young, busty body that sneered at her forty-five years. A profile like Greek sculpture and a temper like an Irish fishwife.

Pettibone tried to protect himself with the newspaper, shutting out her tirade with pure concentration, but she swung wildly and sent the pages skittering across the room into the sink, where they perished wetly in the clutter of dishes.

Pettibone sighed and slumped lower in the uncomfortable metal chair and let the storm break over him. "I couldn't believe you'd be so terribly stupid! 'Your husband just turned the offer down flat,'—that's what Maude said. And you didn't even bother to soften it a little, to explain why. After all my cousin Hal has done for us! You knew he was counting on you, Fred, to manage the new gas station. And you just turned your back and said no. Turned your back on my only cousin and his wife and said no!"

"I don't want to manage the new gas station for your cousin Hal," he said quietly. "Why can't you accept that, Marge?"

"Because I just don't understand it, that's all! Hal gave you a job when you couldn't find one anywhere—"

"And I left it like a bat out of hell when I found a better one!"

"But now he wants to give you the best job you've ever had! He wants you to . . ."

"Manage the new station for him in Willow Grove," he finished wearily. "We've been all through this before, Marge. I said 'Thanks, but no thanks!' I turned it down. I don't want his damned job. I don't want anything from that man ever again! I got a gutful of Hal when I worked for him last year. He's a braggart, a loudmouth, and a bully," he said without rancor, even gently, in that whispery rasp that was a characteristic along with the other ones he had: the thinning straight hair, the skinny chest, the eagle beak.

Marge shifted her position to entreaty and her tone to reason: "Now why do you say things like that, Fred, after all Hal's done for us? What would we have done if he hadn't come to our rescue last year? We were months behind in the rent, we owed everybody. I don't know what we'd have done if Hal—"

"Listen, Marge. I put up with Hal for eighteen months. I greased his jallopies, I pumped his cheap gas, I kept his books, I shoveled snow, I ran his errands. I wasn't an employee, I was the whole staff! And whipping boy to boot."

He had never bothered to explain the details to her; Marge would never understand sadism in the relative she admired—sadism Hal masked as humor. The ball of grease concealed in his handshake, the oil gun that sprayed stains on clean cover-alls, the jack-handle that became a goosing-rod in Hal's hands, the sudden right-hooks to the abdomen, the shock-wire Hal attached to a spark plug—all this was high comedy to the overgrown fathead. The pain and embarrassment of his victim, usually Pettibone, would be met by Hal's donkey-bray. No,

Marge would never understand the cruelty in Hal's humor. She was too fond of slapstick to denounce it in her cousin. She would only echo Hal's words, "Can't you take a joke?"

"Well, what about the money," Marge pursued. "He's offering you a hundred-and-fifty dollars a week and Sundays off. That's half again what you make at the post office now. The post office! At your age, Fred Pettibone! With your education! Pitching mail with a gang of little boys! My husband the mail clerk!"

She jerked her head for emphasis and that wayward lock fell into her eyes, the lock he used to kid her about years ago. "Wendell Willkie!" he'd say teasingly and brush it back tenderly in place. But all the kidding had been burned out of their marriage, along with the tenderness and pet names and dreams of success. It was twenty-two years later. And he was a washout. A ninety-buck a week mail clerk, sitting in a battered apartment, mousey, middle-aged and finished.

But he had been finished long before this, when the mill shut down, ending the promising career of its young auditor before it began. "There would always be a cotton mill in Brompton," that's what he used to say before the mill closed its doors, bringing the town to its knees. Pettibone's security vanished with the bankrupt mill. There was Marge, useless and pregnant with her first baby, his mother, widowed and diabetic, his younger brother, still in school. Pettibone had done what everyone else in Brompton was doing at the time. He panicked. And panic became part of his mental equipment, a permanent part. There had been a haphazard succession of menial jobs—he peddled books from door to door, wrestled stock in the dime store, mixed batter in the doughnut shop. The baby died before it opened its eyes and the state agency sent his mother to a Baptist nursing home. His brother Bill went into the army, Marge landed a job in a dress shop, and finally Pettibone was free. Free to select a career for himself, free to accept and refuse, free to experiment with his likes and dislikes.

Perhaps he had experimented badly. The job at the Merchants' Bank had fizzled, along with all the others. The saving and loan company was a disaster, and he was down to clerking in the downtown credit bureau when his manager replaced him with a bright young college graduate. And there he was, pushing fifty, peddling books from door to door, not making his draw-against-commission, studying the hostile faces or the blank doors that concealed them. The clock had gone backwards and he was back at the starting line. Back to failure. Dismal unemployment and the disgrace of performing tricks with a gas hose for his wife's cousin Hal. Then a meager salvation in his post

office appointment. All this came flooding his memory with the tumbling of a lock of hair.

"Let's not talk any more, Marge." He got up and lifted the coffee pot, then set it down again on the chipped enamel stove. He was not hungry any more.

"Fred," her tone was dangerous. "Take the job with Hal. I want you to." (He would not look at her—he only shook his head). "I WANT you to, Fred," she threatened.

"No. For God's sake. No. No! NO!"

She flopped her arms against her thighs with finality.

"That ties it, then. This is it, Fred. We're through."

He stared at her without understanding. She was not the best thing in his life—nothing was—but she was the surest. "As sure as death, taxes and Marge's mouth" he used to say. And now she was leaving him. His dependable shrew, his ornamental, flimsy cane, his broken crutch, his Marge. What else did he have except Marge?

She parried his stare defiantly, and he knew that if he surrendered now, the last scrap of self-respect he had would be ground underfoot. If he had played a game of failure with his life—and hers—it had been HIS game and he had made all the moves, even if they were wrong ones. But Marge could never understand this queer pride of his in lost causes. It would be senseless to explain it now.

He started for his bedroom, and Marge flung after him, "You're a coward, Fred Pettibone! A whipped, little coward! But I'm not whipped! Not yet! I'm still young! I've kept my looks! And I'm not going down with the ship!"

He glanced back at her mildly from the narrow hallway and said, "Bully for you!"

The institution-grey walls of his room needed painting, the cheap maple furniture was scarred and dull, the old prints faded in their frames. And Pettibone looked grey and dull and faded as the room. He avoided a second look at his mirror, crossed to his closet and pawed through the clutter of stored articles on the floor. The letter was tucked safely away in the bowling bag he never used, smoothed roundly against the grained blueness of the ball. He pulled it out carefully, knowing that he would have to post it later, little unwilling Cupid-after-the-fact of love that he was!

He turned the rusty fastener on his door and waited, listening. Marge would never permit a good battle to go half-fought. But this time she had. Somewhere in the apartment a door banged, then no sound at all. Pettibone was alone in the dusty stillness, fingering a love letter from his wife to another man. A man with the unlikely, theatrical, fictitious name "Josh DeVore."

For the dozenth time he punished himself reading it, forcing hollow, silent laughs at the stupid, school-

girl phrases: ". . . and this week seems like forever" and ". . . it's a prison without you near me" and ". . . I'm miserable with you away." He winced when he came to the initials she used in reference to himself, Pettibone: ". . . I can't even be civil to F.P. any more. Remember when you called him 'Failure Personified'?" Then the dagger thrust: ". . . I'm praying for the day when you are free of S. We will spend the rest of our lives making up for all the time we have lost." The signature finished him, and he sat, futile clown of a man, weeping over it. "Love you passionately, perpetually —Midge." She had written the same line to *him* countless times, years ago, when he was still in college and she in high school. So long ago, before they both forgot how much love and respect meant in their lives.

He got up and wiped his wet cheeks on the sleeve of his ridiculous green pajamas—the ones she had bought him for Christmas, with the yellow lions on them. Was this man DeVore a lion, he wondered, thickly muscled with a thick mane of hair, loud and boastful and arrogant like the cousin Marge adored? All the things he, Pettibone, was not? He thought of all the things he had done to improve his physique, the chest-pulls, the dumbbells lying rusted in the closet along with the beautiful bowling ball he never used any more. And the hi-protein cereals and the male hormones and the vitamin pills. All these things had failed him, just as he had failed himself and Marge and his mother and his brother and all the hopeful employers who had hired him once upon a time.

Pettibone set the letter carefully inside his wallet. Of course he would mail it, just as he had mailed the others he had intercepted at the post office on the facing table or at the cancelling machine, letter primary or secondary sorting cases. "Josh DeVore" with the ornamental "J" in the parochial, back-tilted handwriting that identified Marge as surely as her shrill, "I couldn't believe my ears!"

There was another letter that afternoon, half buried under the white stack on the facing table, and it was his luck to hold it, to face it stamp-downward and to feed it into the cancelling machine. His supervisor was watching him with that blind, nothing-to-do look that marks all mail foremen, but Pettibone traced the letter's progress doggedly into the plastic tray, to the rack, to the primary sorting cases with their labeled, open mouths.

He labored through that half-hour, crucified with the knowledge of it. The empty, profane, abusive humor of the other clerks reached him not at all, not even the dirty jokes Dick Ferris told about traveling salesmen. Finally, the letter was in his hand and he was sauntering unnaturally to the men's room to read it.

Pettibone locked himself behind

a cabinet door and eased the end flap out of the envelope. This one was addressed "General Delivery" as all the others had been, but this time the city was different. Not Albany. No Schenectady. Not Hartford or New Haven. But Providence, Rhode Island, with the huge capitals and swirling loops. DeVore was probably a traveling salesman, like the passionate ones in the jokes. Or maybe his job was more glamorous. Airline pilot? Business executive? He had to be rich and handsome and successful, all the things Pettibone was not, or Marge could not possibly have fallen in love with him.

The message was short, concise, irrevocable. "I'm going to leave F.P. I know this sounds impulsive. The timing is all wrong. But living with no man at all is better than living with a bad imitation of one." A geyser churned suddenly in his stomach and erupted before he could channel its flow.

He leaned against the rough wooden door of the cabinet punishing his forehead on the splintered grain, while his thoughts teetered this way and that, out of control. His fingers tightened on the perfumed blue stationery mashing it beyond readability, and he was sick again.

His supervisor allowed him to go home—that chalky pallor was reason enough. He even punched Pettibone's time card for him; his little mail clerk was not able to coordinate his hands for that simple function, standing vacantly, staring at the time clock as if he did not understand what it was. Flu. One of those tricky, new viruses, the officials said later.

Pettibone walked the streets of Brompton a long time, ignoring traffic signals and other pedestrians. He was not aware that anything or anyone existed on this new bare stage of his world except the three players in this old triangle drama, a silly love letter and events beyond his reach that were rushing him into an unlikely last act.

The flower woman in front of the bank held a bunch of chrysanthemums under his nose, and he stared at the ugly, leathery hands and the chipped fingernails a long time, entranced, before he knocked her arm away and ran down the street. The High Street shop windows and signs trapped him in a weird kaleidoscope of dull colors, where he floundered helplessly, looking for the orderly pavement squares that would guide him home. Then someone was leading him by the arm in a burst of enthusiastic conversation that started and ended with "Whatchaneedizzadrink!"

It was not clear to him then who the drinking friend was: it looked a little like Eddie McCann, who used to sell patent medicines in Harvey's Drug Store, before Harvey ran away with Lora McCann. Then someone else was sitting on the bar stool McCann had occupied, spinning a liquorish yarn about HIS di-

vorce, and even Reds Gawler, the bartender, had to add his breakup to the busted wreck of a conversation. Wasn't there any man in the world who wasn't tricked, cuckolded, lied to, abandoned by some trusted minx he had married?

The soft bells of the Congregational Church reached him on a bench in City Common, sitting in a cold autumn drizzle, trying to focus the rusty statue of Nathan Hale. He was at that border point between drunk and sober when the mind begins to tick with perfect precision, when perception and understanding are brilliantly wedded and the reserves of available courage seem inexhaustible. That morning's braw about cousin Hal's offer was a convenient device for Marge to lever a crisis between them, of course. Any reason would have served her as well. And if nothing presented itself to destroy their marriage there was always his dreary history of failure, the job at the post-office that embarrassed her, or any other available excuse—even his appearance or his personality would do. It was obvoius to him now that the other man, DeVore, was the prime reason for this smashup.

Strange that Pettibone could never intercept any of his letters to Marge. This bothered him. He wanted to measure the extent of DeVore's passion for her, on paper, pick at it, whittle the words for sincerity and falsehood. He wondered where they had met, and how, what he had said to win her so completely away from him. Where was their meeting place, their love nest? How did he communicate with her? Certainly not through the commonplace mails that had tripped her up. Pettibone thought of stories he had read of spies and lovers who arranged more original mail boxes for themselves, in the hollows of trees, in unused file drawers of the public library, and other imaginative nooks and crannies. He remembered the day after he had intercepted the first letter, months ago, when he had surprised himself checking the hedges in front of his house, the bottom of the milk box and even the fuse chamber in the basement for concealed messages. He had even investigated the general delivery services in Brompton and the neighboring towns, all in vain. Marge would never use her own name, of course.

The wind had picked up, lashing wet leaves against his trousers, and the night cold needled through his clothes. He did not know how long he had been sitting there, alone with two pompous pigeons and a hungry squirrel.

Now he had to go home and do something. Talk reasonably, or maybe forcefully. Show his manhood and his authority over her. What the hell does a man say or do in a situation like this, anyway? Perhaps nothing.

Walking was a problem at first, hampered as he was by booze and cramps from the cold, but he legged

it determinedly home and fumbled the front door open. "Who's there?" Marge called out (so she was here!) and he answered "Only me."

She was in the bathroom. He could see her primping in the mirror with that pursed up look women have in mirrors. He hurried past along the narrow corridor before she could say anything else. A few steps to his closet, and the bowling bag was in his hand, heavy with the weight of the ball. He hefted it by the leather handle, like a man trying to guess its weight.

"What are you doing home at this time?" she said, her voice harsh against the tiles of the bathroom. He did not answer, toeing gently along the passage, a caricature of the husband sneaking out for a night with the boys.

She flung the door open, and he could see her with the garish light upon her best dress, the blue and gold knitted one he liked, a metal compact in her hand, a powder puff in the other. Ready to shout and scold and cut him with her tongue. For a flash of time, he considered letting her go, for wouldn't he be better off without all this? An overwhelming anger—a latent primitive manhood in him—erupted, and his decision was made. He swung the leather-coated ball and she held out her powder puff pathetically against it. The blow caught her on the left temple with a solid crunch. She whipped out an arm, shattering the mirror with her compact and tumbled over into the tub.

Pettibone felt wildly exhilarated that it had been so simple. He almost shrieked his excitement, until he saw the blood coursing from the lopsided head, trickling darkly against the white enamel. Numb with horror, then, he tried to stanch the flow, dabbing at her with a piece of toilet paper.

He was in severe shock—"catatonic," the doctors said—and they put him in the security section of the Brompton Asylum, where he stared fixedly at his floor pad and the bare walls, without moving, without speaking, barely breathing. When cousin Hal asked to see him, the doctors agreed readily. For perhaps this big, blundering man Pettibone resented so much could reach him, in the black, silent world where he had shut himself.

But Pettibone did not react at all, did not seem to see his visitor, did not hear him when Hal told him about the trick to make a man out of Pettibone—inventing a lover named DeVore, then saturating the post office with love letters that they knew he would intercept.

THE SNATCHERS

The plan was fool-proof! They'd spent two years together in the same cell polishing it to perfection. It should have worked. But they hadn't counted on that spunky little teen-age girl . . . nor on the sad-eyed slobbering hound dog that smelled her out.

A NOVELETTE

BY M. G. WESLEDER

The doctor held Buster Charles Dutton's still wet nine and one half pound body by the ankles and gave him a smart rap on his buttocks. The indignant squall that followed prompted the doctor to remark to the new mother, "With those lungs and that physique he might well become a fighter!"

And Buster Charles Dutton *DID* become a fighter—in bars, poolhalls, and back alleys of San Francisco's tough waterfront. At fourteen he dropped out from junior high school. He seemed more inclined to savor a career affiliated with switchblades, clubs and broken beer bottles. To satisfy his needs, he augmented an uncertain income by rolling helpless drunks. Among his accumulation of mangled cartilages and un-enhancing scars, he also acquired a considerable juvenile police record.

Upon reaching adulthood, his miscellany of arrests for assaults, petty thefts, and some odd burglaries finally netted him a two year vacation. He found himself in California's maximum security pokey at Folsom. There he made the acquaintance of one Len Ringley.

When Len was born, the attending doctor looked askance at the puny lethargic lump and humphed. He calculated gloomily on his chances for collecting a fee from the county supported and husbandless mother. Despite this unpromising beginning, Len grew up and attended school with slightly less than good grades. He did, however, exhibit one outstanding talent. He possessed an unusual flair and affection for penmanship. Len was content to labor ceaselessly in Spencerian practice, rolling perfect lines of connected "O's" like coils of endless springs. He copied his incorrect lessons in the neat and graceful script popular of the period. He delighted his teachers with exquisitely shaded "W's" and "S's".

Later, came success at imitating

handwriting and duplicating signatures. It was but a brief step from there to affixing them to the lower right corner of checks. He came to enjoy this easy money with a blunted conscience. There were of course, tense moments when these latex warrants were being scrutinized by circumspect shopkeepers. He made a point to keep the amounts modest on his checks. The take was low but the risk was correspondingly slight. Len abhorred violence and so chose this as the more serene of dishonest livelyhoods.

At last some citizens, outraged by his bland mockery of their trust, together with a sharp-eyed detective, happily witnessed against him in a courtroom.

Thus, we find Len Ringley lodged also at Folsom, ironically, his keep supported by those selfsame taxpayers.

By some unholy mis-chance, these oddly dissimilar characters were placed as cell-mates. A period of mutual distrust and suspicion between them soon dissipated. Their palship soon blossomed into a partnership. For months a nefarious scheme had been germinating in the obliquely oriented brain of Len Ringley. In Bus, he found an ear, eager toward any project spelling easy money. Len began to delineate his recreant conspiracy like a General planning a campaign. Bus became his Chief of Staff and ideas, batted back and forth like shuttlecocks, were pruned, polished, and streamlined like a Hemmingway discourse. Each trivial detail planned, also had an alternate twin. Every unpredictable emergency provided against, they were not, they boasted to themselves, committing the same stupid blunders unsuccessful snatchers had perpertrated in the past. The final draft was a bareboned model of contrivance. Like a completed movie scenario, their perfect kidnap plot was memorized, "In the can", and salted away for opportune exposure.

CHAPTER TWO

Len Ringley gained his parole in July of '65. Bus was due to follow in August. The very day Len was returned to San Francisco, he proceeded to inaugurate the initial steps toward their project. As a first base of operations, he rented a room in a Taylor Street Hotel. A more provident man than Bus, Len had long anticipated a future need for money. There was awaiting him in a San Francisco bank under an assumed name, fifteen hundred dollars plus some accumulated interest.

Always a fastidious dresser, several hundred dollars of these savings went for an expensive selection of suits, shirts, shoes, and accessories.

He began at once to alter his appearance. He darkened his hair and eyebrows, changed his mode of haircut, and grew a dapper mustache. His new mien afforded him the out-

ward guise of a successful salesman. Furthering his devious machinations he shopped for materials necessary to launch his program. Pens, ink, a small print press adequate for reproducing business cards, a variety of paper and envelopes. The next four hours he spent meticulously forging a California driver's license using the name "Kelvin D. Dooley", with ficticious address and birthdate.

The day following, he purchased from an obscure used car lot, an old black Buick sedan.

With it he transferred his effects to a room, selected from an ad, in the Richmond District. He found privacy, (guaranteed by the landlady) and a parking place in the rear for the Buick. The most difficult task of all now confronted Len. He must find quarters suitable for concealing a kidnap victim.

He began by systematically touring the old sections of the City, favoring the Mission side of Market Street, known affectionately to San Franciscans as "South of the Slot." A week of scouting found his search fanning outward until he was coursing through some of the oldest sections of the city.

One afternoon he spotted an ancient and apparently vacated apartment building. It stood an alley apart from an equally old and deserted warehouse. Both had been slated for the wreckers ball. A freshly painted sign proclaimed it, a magnified drawing of the slum clearance project graphically portrayed it. Len studied the old structure from all angles before venturing up the crumbling cement steps. He opened the front door to an unlighted and trash-littered hallway. Peering in the dimness he pressed a bell button under "CARETAKER." A wizened, bleary-eyed alcoholic character, bent with years, answered the ring.

"Ain't no place for rent", he volunteered crabbily. "Almost everybody's moved out. Buildin's goin to be tore down soon. I won't have no job neither."

"I'm not looking for an apartment," said Len reassuringly. I'm an inspector for the R. J. Burton Salvage Company. Here's my card. We buy used plumbing fixtures. My firm sent me here to inventory the tubs, pipes, and stuff for purchase. I check it all and bid for it before the building is wrecked. I've come to examine all the rooms and estimate the value of what we want to buy."

The old man raised the card to his rhuemy eyes.

It read:

R. J. Burton
Salvage Incorporated
1600 Conifor St.
South San Francisco, Calif.
Kelvin Dooley, Estimator. LI 6-4291

Len watched closely to see if the old geezer would question the name or the phony aldress.

"Oh sure, Mr. Dooley. Go right on up. Be mighty careful, though,

there's nails and junk all over the floors. Lots of rats too, I kill 'em whenever I see 'em, but I ain't so good at it any more. I figger I got about three weeks of job left, then I'll go back on my pension. My name's Duffing, Mr. Dooley."

"Thanks, Mr. Duffing," Len said putting out his hand, "Glad to make your acquaintance."

"Just call me Joe, nobody's called me Mr. Duffing in forty year." Joe cackled. Len smiled and moved toward the dilapidated stairway.

"Want me to show you about, Mr. Dooley?" inquired Joe, starting out of his room.

"No thanks, Joe. I'll just nose around now and see you on my way out."

"Got a flashlight?" asked Joe.

"No," Len answered. "Not with me, I've got one in my car."

"Better take mine, some of them floors ain't got no 'lectricity on."

"O.K., Joe. I'll just make a quick survey today. If my company is interested I'll come back later."

"Be careful of them big rats, Mr. Dooley, they bite!"

Len accepted the old man's flash and climbed the narrow carpeted steps to the second floor. It was so black in the unlighted hall he turned on the flashlight at once. Papers, trash, beer cans, and old bottles were littered from room to room. The third floor was a replica of the second, but on the fourth floor Len found the electric lights to be still connected. On the floors of every apartment were still the inevitable broken toys, dirty rags, and even dried garbage.

When he reached the hallway end toward the front, he discovered two adjoining rooms with separate entrances, doors still intact with knobs and locks. Switching on the lights he inspected each room. One faced the street. Four stories below on the opposite side of the street was located a small park, with benches, trees, and shrubbery for the comfort of the neighborhood families. The single window in the second room faced only the blank brick wall of the empty warehouse across the alley. Only a narrow view of the street was visible from a very acute angle from this room. In each of the rooms a bathroom was still furnished with tubs and washbowls of ancient vintage. Rusty water continued to drip into the chipped vessels. The cracked and stained toilet bowls held water and were serviceable. Satisfied, Len nodded to himself and began his descent to the lower floors.

He knocked at Joe's door instead of ringing and heard the old guy's approach. As the door opened a blast of fetid air whooshed out, a blend of body odor, kerosene heat, and stale wine. Len winced but handed Joe the flashlight.

"Thanks again, Joe. This is a pretty big job. It's going to take me about two weeks to complete my estimations properly. Tell you what I'd like to do, Joe. I'll have to work

day and night to finish before those wreckers come. I'm getting in a helper for a few days so I'll just put in some cots for us and stay right on the job 'till it's finished.

We're going to have to tear into the flooring and that will be hazardous for anyone to come around. I'll wall off the stairway right here to keep anyone from coming up stairs. We'll need to get in and out ourselves though, do you have keys for the top floor rooms and the back door?"

Joe eyed the twenty dollar bill Len was exposing in his wallet.

"Why, of course, Mr. Dooley. You go right ahead, here's the keys. I ain't ben up there for a month. It's them damn rats, I hate em! They's a parking place in back, just come through the alley either way." Joe accepted the proffered bill and popped back into his room.

A bottle of wine now and then, for the old duck, Len mused, and we'll have the run of the place.

He stopped next at an army surplus store on Mission. He selected three army cots, three chairs, army blankets, a primus stove, and two folding card tables.

"Going camping," he pointed out to the sales clerk. He lugged his purchases up the rear stairway. He kicked aside most of the litter to clear a space and installed two of the cots in the front room, and the other in the second room. Len then visited a Supermarket. There he bought paper towels, some drinking glasses, soap, toilet tissue, and other sundries. The place was, except for the debris, beginning to resemble living quarters.

Still further preparations were necessary to complete the elaborate intrigue. He sought a lumber yard and selected a 4 x 8 sheet of plywood, a hammer, nails, black paint, and a lettering brush. He carried this melange to the rear entrance. Inside he expertly lettered the plyboard to read:

DANGER! THIS BUILDING
CONDEMNED.
No one allowed on upper floors.

Len nailed it to obstruct passage from the first floor to the upper levels. This completed he returned to his room in Richmond and sat down to pen a letter to Bus. In a tremulous script he wrote:

Buster C. Dutton
Box 10643D
Represa, California

Dear Uncle Buster:

I understand you are soon to gain your parole. Martha and I want you to know you can stay with us until you find employment. Write as soon as you know the exact date of your release. Martha is not feeling too well these days so I will drive up alone to get you. We are sending some cigarettes by separate mail and hope you get them soon.

Your loving nephew,
Kenneth Morgan.

P.S. It has been years since we saw each other. I hope you will remember and recognize me. K.M.

The Monday following, Len found a reply in his mailbox.

Dear Kenneth: I got your welcome letter this a.m. I'm glad you and Martha will let me stay at your house until I get me a job. The machine shop instructor says I could get work anywheres as a body and fender man. The warden called me to his office and I showed him your letter. He talked to me a long time. He sed if I com out with the rite atitude to ward sewsiety, I culd re-sume my place in it. Kenneth I dont want to be pened up here in any more jails or prisons. The warden says I can get out Aug. 15 with my time off for good behavior at noon. So if you cum here I will walk out of Folsom a free man then. I sure look foreward to getting out and seeing you and Martha.

Your uncle Buster.

Len read the letter through twice and laughed. Bus had learned his lessons well and memorized their code to perfection.

At twelve noon, August 15, Len moved the Buick into the parking area before Folsom Prison and sat, reading a paper and smoking. He was aware of the penalty for ex-convicts to fraternize. He hoped his disguise would not be challenged by any familiar guards coming on duty. He covertly watched as visitors strolled under the archway of the outer gate. Some stopped to enter the Hobby Shop and make purchases of paintings, carvings, musical instruments, and dozens of beautifully contrived articles, made by hands busy in the endeavor to smother the long hours of boredom.

Len's green sunglasses sharply outlined the familiar surroundings, the austere walls marching sternly up and down the rolling hills, an undulating stone frame for the grey stockade. He thought he recognized old Charley Hansen, a trusty, tending the plots of flowers in the courtyard. He and Charley had often discussed the things prisoners talk about, girls, prison rules, food and other inmates. Len was getting a light case of nerves now that the critical moment had arrived.

At exactly twelve ten, Bus' rather stooped figure, lugging a cheap prison made suitcase trudged through the outer gate and exhibited a paper to the guard in his cubicle. Bus began to search the crowded lot for a driver wearing green sunglasses, reading a paper and smoking a cigaret. At last he spotted Len, and with a small wave of recognition hurried to the black car.

"Hi, Len." Bus tossed his bag into the back seat.

"Hi, Bus." Len put the automobile in motion without further greeting. They drove out and down the ing. They drove out and down the treelined exit toward the highway.

During the two hour drive to San Francisco, Len filled in to Bus, the details of his progress. But could only nod silent approval to everything Len told him. At the Bay Bridge Toll Gate, Len paid the

twenty-five cent fee and they rolled across the towering structure at a modest rate.

The magnificent panorama of San Francisco's skyline made little impression on Bus. He seemed preoccupied only with anticipation of events to come. He had exhausted any inventiveness he might have contributed to their cabal and was content to let Len mastermind from here on.

Len drove directly to the apartment and parked the Buick between two cars of similar vintage.

CHAPTER THREE

Len and Bus now began their review of the requisites for an ideal kidnap victim. First the family must be wealthy. Secondly, they should be parents of a girl about the age from ten to fifteen. They particularly stipulated a female. In their reasoning, the mother and father would more apt to be concerned about her personal safety. A boy might be strong and active, not as easily intimidated. She would be less likely to cause a ruckus if threatened. Next in importance, they would select a family living out of the city, preferably from one of the more opulant areas of the Penninsula. They screened a dozen possible targets and finally resolved upon Judy Rossiter, daughter of Doctor Emmett Rossiter, a surgeon of national repute. Coming from already wealthy forebears, he was known to be worth at least a million. His daughter Judy attended a high school only blocks away from their residence, a long rambling California type home situated on a treelined avenue west of the business section of Burlingame. The entire community was populated by the more prosperous and influential citizenry, which included both active and retired movie stars.

Len and Bus had scouted the beautiful shake-roofed, four car home for a week. They calculated to the minute the time it took Judy to traverse the distance from school to her home. Only on occasion did her schedule differ. Friday was basketball practice, otherwise she was punctual.

Even when Len had ascertained all conditions were "Go," they continued to rehearse how each move should be made and the exact point where the abduction should take place, how each should act and talk.

Tuesday afternoon became sunny following a foggy morning. The teeming El Camino Real traffic roared deafeningly with it's medley of trucks, commuters, and driving women shoppers. Len ushered the Buick into the right traffic lane and entered the now familiar circuitous route to the Rossiter residence.

Two blocks away they parked under a shady plane tree to keep vigil for their rabbit. At 3:45, three young female figures all carrying books approached an intersection a block away. At the street corner

they stopped for a moment to chat and bid goodbyes. A pretty dark-eyed, ponytailed girl in a smart coral pink sweater and grey skirt turned into the street where the two men were parked. As she advanced along the sidewalk, Len started up the car until his progress was parallel with hers.

"Oh Miss," he called from the open car window. Judy halted, puzzled and a little apprehensive. Len pulled the car closer and stopped.

"Excuse me, Miss, we are looking for Parker Avenue, do you know how we get there?"

Judy hesitated before answering, then shook her head negatively. "No Sir, I don't think it's around here."

Bus had taken his place in the back seat and now thrust a map through the opened door.

"This map says "Parker" should be right around here somewhere."

Judy shook her head again but stepped closer to read the fine print. At that second Bus grasped Judy's wrist and gave her a yank. Judy's books spilled into the street and she drew a deep breath to scream. Bus clapped a big paw over her open mouth and drew her headlong to the floor of the car. She kicked out wildly and tried to loosen Bus's grip over her mouth. Failing at that she whacked at him with the one book she still clutched in one hand together with her small purse. Len closed the door, and they sped west toward the isolated hills.

By this time, Bus had pulled off one of the 3″ wide adhesive strips tacked to the back seat upholstery and slapped it over Judy's still gasping mouth. Another he wound quickly around her thrashing ankles and another securely pinioned both hands. Her eyes were rolling wildly like a panicked mare, but her struggles gradually subsided until she lay quietly, breathing heavily through her nostrils. Bus threw an old army blanket over her subdued form and leaned back to get his own breath. The entire manuever had taken only three minutes and they were right on schedule.

Len had watched the whole proceedings in the rear view mirror. As he drove steadily he conceded Bus had played his part to perfection. A muffled moan prompted Bus to lean down and remove the blanket from Judy's face to give her air. The fright and shock was still so great she had her eyes tightly pinched shut. She couldn't see Bus reach into his pocket, remove a small case and assemble the hypodermic syringe. A second later Judy received a shot in her left arm that would keep her immobilized for the next four hours. This was time needed for darkness to be well established. Approaching the coastline Len found a deserted site where they could park and overlook the ocean.

The gorgeous sunset for which that portion of the Pacific Coast is renowned began to submit to the

encroaching fog. Occupied with plans other than sea-scape watching, Len and Bus waited for a break in the train of artichoke trucks and eased the Buick into a slot on the highway toward San Francisco. Full darkness had set in as they continued up Highway 1.

Len drove at once to the secluded lot behind the apartments. They sat in silence for a moment, scanning the blackness for any possible observor. Nothing was heard but the distant street noises. Len left the car first, went up the steps and unlocked the door. Bus picked up Judy's relaxed body with the blanket still wrapped around her. He carried her up the three flights puffing at every step. He was relieved to dump her inert body on the cot.

"Everything O.K. so far?" Bus asked breathing heavily. Len looked at the prone figure. "Looks like we've done it." He dropped Judy's book and purse on the card table. "I'll come back when she wakes up, there's no telling how she might take this. You go fix us a drink."

In the adjoining room Bus turned on the light and poured two whiskeys. Len had blacked out the window with tar paper and not a gleam escaped to the outside. Judy's room was far enough along the alley so her light could not be well seen from the street. Len had nailed her window securely four inches down from the top for ventilation.

Bus leaned back in his chair. A few drinks later Len came in.

"I'll wait here until she comes out of it." He drank his whiskey and sat back.

A slight moan and creaking noise brought them both to attention. Len reached the room first, unlocked it and entered with Bus on his heels. He looked at Judy's restless form, reached over and jerked the tape from her mouth. Had she been fully conscious this act might have harvested a full fledged scream of pain. In her half drugged state she felt nothing. Len removed her ankle and wrist bindings in the same manner.

As she slowly returned to a state of wakefulness, her head rolled from side to side. Her eyes opened and she blinked at the light bulb.

"Water," she mumbled, "I want a drink of water."

Len went to the bathroom and filled a glass with the rust colored liquid. He lifted Judy's head and she sipped a little. The water revived her somewhat and she began to look about in dull curiosity.

"Judy," Len spoke to her kindly, "Just be quiet. You are alright, do you hear me?"

Judy's eyes rolled back and forth a few times before nodding.

"Don't be afraid, nobody's going to hurt you. You will have to stay here with us for a few days, then you can go home. Do you understand?"

"I got a headache," she said weakly. Len turned to Bus. "Go down and get some aspirin," he ordered.

Bus left at once. When he returned Len gave her three of the tablets. She washed them down with the brown water. Shortly she fell asleep again. Len drew a sign of relief and left the room, locking the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alma Rossiter glanced at the gold wall clock with some apprehension. She turned to Doctor Rossiter, seated in his lounging chair, reading a medical journal.

"I just can't understand why Judy isn't home, she's never been this late before without phoning me."

Rossiter put his magazine down and stood up. "Could she have stopped at Carrie's house?" he asked. "She often does."

"But not without calling me," Alma said. "I'll call Carrie now."

"I do think you are worrying unnecessarily though, Alma. She'll probably show up any minute. Isn't this her basketball practice day?

Alma had the receiver off the hook to call, when the door chimes gave out their soft clangs. She opened the door to two small boys standing there holding school books.

"Mrs. Rossiter," one volunteered. "We found these books in the street down there, (pointing). I guess they belong to Judy, her name's in 'em."

"Emmett!" Alma's voice was becoming hysterical. "Come here, these boys picked up Judy's books in the street. Oh dear God, what could have happened!"

Rossiter experienced an icy wave down his spine, but retained his composure for Alma's sake.

"Where did you find these books, boys?"

"Right down there," the larger boy said. He again pointed to a spot several blocks away. "They was in the gutter, but I saw Judy's name inside. She musta lost 'em."

"Thank you boys, here's a quarter apiece for your trouble. I guess she did lose them."

Rossiter turned toward pale and trembling Alma.

"Pull yourself together, Alma. This may mean nothing at all, but I'll call the school and see what time she left.

Alma moved zombie-like to the center of the luxurious living room. "I just know something dreadful has happened to her. Why were her books in the street? If she was with Carrie—Oh my God, where is she?"

"Now Alma, steady yourself. I'm calling the school immediately."

Rossiter dialed and asked to speak to the Principal. "Gregory, this is Doctor Rossiter. Our girl Judy has not come home from school yet, is there any reason she may have been delayed?"

"Wait a minute, Doctor, I'll contact her final period teacher. Please hold for a minute."

He came back on the line. "Doctor, Judy left classes with the rest of the younsters. Is there anything wrong?"

"Probably nothing, Gregory, Judy

is a little late coming home, her mother is worried. Thanks anyway."

"Well, if anything is the matter, I'll expect to be advised, goodbye."

Doctor Rossiter began to be progressively concerned. Judy's leaving the school as customary, her books found in the street, not at Carrie's—still, the idea of a kidnapping did not occur to him.

As an outlet for action, and from sheer habit, he visited his mailbox at the curb. An unstamped letter in an unfamiliar hand gave him some intuitive chills. Instinctively he knew the contents before he opened the envelope, praying he was wrong, but positive he was right. In a strange back slanted script he read: Dr. Rossiter:

We have your daughter, Judy. She is well and will stay well if you follow these instructions. It is money we want. Fifty thousand dollars for her safe return. All in bills of ten, twenty, fifty and 100 dollars. Not new ones. Don't bother to record the serials, we haven't time to wait. Don't notify the police, the F.B.I. or newspapers. Tie the money in $1000 packages, bundle them all in heavy brown paper, and tie with strong string. This money must be ready by tomorrow without fail. We know you can get it so no stalling. You will get a message as to how it is to be delivered. We mean business. Do exactly as we say if you want Judy back alive.

We Have Judy.

Rossiter let the paper droop slowly to his side. Alma was observing him apprehensively. There was no opportunity to hide the note from her. His own face was pale. He closed his eyes against her desperate appeal.

"Alma," his voice was choked. "Judy has been kidnapped!"

"I knew it, I knew it," Alma almost shrieked. "I felt it, she's gone!"

Rossiter quickly crossed the room and embraced his wife.

"Don't worry, darling, we'll get her back. Please don't panic."

"Why, why, why," Alma was becoming hysterical again. "What do they want with Judith?"

Rossiter tried to sooth her. "All they want is money, dear. They say they will return her if we pay them."

She rested her head on his shoulder, not yet completely able to comprehend the tragic confrontation.

Rossiter settled his wife into a chair and hurried to mix a sedative. Alone he began to assess the situation in a more rational and practical manner. Nothing could be done today, he reasoned. Evidently he would have to wait for a further message. Essentially a man of action, delay frustrated him. Where could he turn for help without jeapordizing Judy? Obviously not the police, or the F.B.I.

As he stirred the calming potion for Alma, his mind raced. The name "Don Preston" came to the foreground of his confused thinking.

Don and he had graduated "Cum

Laude" in the same class from Berkeley's University of California. Emmett had pursued a medical career to become one of San Francisco's leading surgeons with National renown. Preston chose to follow law. His unusual bent for criminal detection attracted the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and inevitably he found himself a member of that August body. After ten years of service his brilliant solutions of several noted criminal cases resulted in an avalanche of publicity that rendered null his usefulness as a secret agent.

He returned to a lucrative private practice, but on occasion was requisitioned by the Department for special cases.

Still unmarried, he and Doctor Rossiter were inseparable friends and traditional golf rivals. Rossiter could think of no better person to consult in his dilemma and still abide by the terms of the ransom note. He placed a call to Don's apartment in San Francisco at once.

In his apartment, Don was located playing poker with some attorney cronies.

"Hello, Preston here."

"Don, this is Emmett."

"Oh, Hello, what's up Doc?" Don comicly imitated a popular cartoon character.

"Don," Rossiter's voice was infirm. "I desperately need your help and advice."

Don sensed immediately the situation did not call for frivolous humor, and he inquired more solicitously.

"What's the problem, Emmett. Anything wrong?"

"Very, Don, and I can't discuss it over the phone, will you come?"

"Gosh, Doc. Of course, do you mean right now?"

"Yes, if you can. It's an emergency."

"You sound upset. Is it Alma?"

"Not exactly, but I wish you'd hurry."

"I'll be there within an hour."

Rossiter's trembling hand hung up the receiver with manifest relief.

"Alma," he spoke to his shocked and staring wife. "Don will be here soon. He'll know exactly what to do. Please come and lie down. I'll cancel all appointments and hospital calls for tomorrow and until Judy is back."

Alma nodded vacantly and rose to obey her husband. Rossiter was concerned that the shocking events of the last hour might disturb her mental balance.

He lifted the phone and called his office nurse.

CHAPTER FIVE

The cacophony of dim and distant traffic, rising and falling, gradually permeated Judy's drugged sleep. Kaleidescopic flashes of unreal pictures in colorful confusion raced through her brain in disorderly procession.

The fantastic images faded sud-

denly as recognizable sounds rose to the brim of her consciousness.

With a start she became fully awake. Her eyes opened to weird surroundings. It was daylight. Otherwise motionless, she let her eyes roam the perimeter of the four walls, taking in the torn, water-stained and faded wallpaper. She began to have some vague recall of the events of the night before. She felt no fear, just a wonderment about her curious surroundings.

She studied the room minutely. In places the old-fashioned flowered wallpaper had peeled back, exposing crumbling plaster and ancient lath. She heard rustlings and squeakings within the walls, a sound only huge rodents made. About the littered floor was scattered a more putrescent evidence of their presence. She examined her covering. It was an old army blanket. Except for the cheap card table and a flimsy chair, the room was bare of furnishings.

Her gaze wandered to the green light cord hanging from the ceiling. Judy became aware of her need to visit the bathroom and made a move to arise.

The cot creaked and her bare feet hit the cold and dirty linoleum floor.

She felt crummy in her wrinkled and slept-in clothing. Absently she noted her slippers were paired alongside her cot. Standing groggily for a moment, she moved toward the doorless bathroom. It proved even more dismal than the room itself. A spiderwebbed and spotted cast iron tub rested it's four dirty claws on the stinking, cracked and filthy floor. The wash basin proved just as bad, but Judy was grateful for the water that came out of the pitted faucet. The toilet still operated, noisily, spilling down a cascade of rusty water. She found provided for her paper towels, toilet tissue, and a bar of soap. She felt slightly better after a hasty wash in the offensive water. She began to take a new interest in her confinement.

Instinctively she knew the door would be locked, even before she tried the knob. Her efforts created a rattle. It was answered at once by the sound of a nearby door opening and closing. Footsteps approached and seconds later a key scraped in the lock.

Judy retreated to her cot and sat down. Len and Bus entered and relocked the door.

"Hello," Len was disarming. "How do you feel this morning?"

Judy said nothing, just stared at the two and tried to smooth her wrinkled skirt.

Len continued in his most charming voice.

"I guess you remember why we brought you here, Judy. You won't be hurt, so relax. We'll get you some breakfast pretty soon, but first I want you to understand a few things. We are going to ask your daddy for some money to let you go. He doesn't know where you are and he dare not call in the police or the

F.B.I. If he should he knows you won't get home alive. We have told him all this. He is a smart man. He will do as we have told him to do. As soon as we collect the money, you will be free to go home. Now, while you are here, you are not to raise any fuss, scream or try to attract anyone's attention. I think you are a pretty smart girl too, so just behave and we won't have to use any force. We don't want to do that, but Bus here is an expert, so don't tempt him. I warn you. He'll be the one to answer to if you make trouble, is that all very clear?"

Judy nodded silently. Her dark eyes studied the pair. Small sparks of hostility flashed.

Her first words were, "I'm hungry."

Len grinned in relief. "That's more like it. We don't guarantee sirloin steaks, but you'll get your meals. Just be quiet. We'll be back soon. Remember, one of us will always be next door. Rap on the wall if you want anything." Bus had to get his say in. "Yeah, and if you give us any trouble you won't need to rap, I'll be right in!"

The pair left, making it a point to rattle the key in the door lock.

Judy settled back on the cot to ponder her predicament. She had taken an instant aversion to the one called "Bus." His teeth were bad, his breath, augmented with raw liquor, even at a distance was nauseating. She decided she could at least tolerate the clean one. He had acted gentlemanly, whatever his base purpose, and he was considerate of her comfort.

Fifteen minutes later the lock rattled again and Bus stepped in carrying two paper bags. Placing them on the card table, he pulled out a humburger sandwich, some potato chips and a carton of milk.

"Ain't dinner at the Palace," Bus smirked, "but it's nourishin. Now if your Highness wants anything else, just rap."

Judy was left alone. She inspected the hamburger and bit into it hungrily. The cheap meat was rancid. She wrinkled her nose in distaste and drank the milk. It at least was fresh and the chips tasted good. Looking inside the paper bag she saw a register receipt. It read, 'Franks's Franks' with a 23rd street address, San Francisco. She poked it into her purse and sat back to consider her plight.

She was kidnapped, it was obvious. That of course meant for ransom. Her parents were very probably worrying themselves sick about her disappearance. Her father had undoubtedly been at home when she was first missed. His normal medical practice occupied him in the early morning at hospitals with a few office patients after two-thirty in the afternoon. His presence at home would be a comfort to her mother. She knew her father would spare no time in accumulating money for her release.

Even wealthy people could have

difficulty in producing fifty-thousand dollars on such short notice.

"Hi, Toots," Bus's head was thrust in the doorway. "My partner's going out and he told me to ask you if you wanted anything, (besides gettin' outa here.) Bus tittered at his trivial humor. Judy stared at his untidy hair.

"As long as I have a choice, bring me some chewing gum and cokes. Something to read too, comics maybe."

"Choosey, ain't you? Oh well, anything to keep you shut up."

Half hour later Bus, reappeared with a few articles. Six packs of Beeman's gum, some comic books, a True Tales Magazine, and two iced cokes.

Judy decided to see what Bus was made of.

"Have a coke," she invited.

Bus grinned. "Sure, thanks."

He flipped the baseball type cap off the top of both bottles, lifted his and drank noisily. He placed the empty bottle on the table, arose and waved. "See you later."

After he exited and locked the door, Judy began her analysis. "A stupid Goon," she thought, "but potentially dangerous."

On second thought, she dumped the entire contents of her purse on the small table and inventoried the articles. One lipstick, one eyebrow pencil, one powder compact with mirror, three spare rubber bands for her ponytail, some paper clips, a comb, one tiny bottle of perfume, her library card, a fingernail file, a wrinkled dollar bill and ninety-five cents in change plus the register receipt from the hamburger stand. In a slit pocket there were two snapshots of favorite boy friends, one of herself and a girl chum.

Her inventive mind began to search for a method of getting word of her confinement to the outside.

Judy went to the window and surveyed what could be seen of the park across the street. The narrow aperture between the two buildings afforded only a small glimpse of a bench, the greenery and the tops of cars and trucks traversing the street. No persons were visible to her. Only occasionally did someone stroll past the narrow strip of sidewalk within her vision. She thought of signaling by means of her compact mirror. After a few experiments she concluded the scheme would work only when the sun was directly overhead.

She stepped back and turned smack into the arms of Bus. So intent was she in her efforts she did not hear him unlock the door.

Bus's face was livid. In a fury he backhanded her across her face and she sprawled on the grimy floor trying to protect her face from further battering.

He stood shaking with rage over her prostrate form.

"You dirty little bitch, already trying something funny! After all our warning. Now you'll see if we meant it when we told you to behave!"

Bus reached down and jerked her erect. Another viscious slap knocked her onto her cot. Her eyes bulged, she protected herself as best she could with her hands and choked out, "Quit it, Damn you!"

Bus stood over her, still trembling with wrath, ready to strike again.

"Listen once more, you," he snarled. "Another try like that and I'll really bust you. We was trying to be nice, but no, you couldn't see it that way. Now you got to "or else" comin' to you!"

Bus walked to her compact lying on the floor and ground the glass to shards with his heel.

Judy raised to her elbow. She lifted her red-rimmed eyes to Bus' face. They were rapidly becoming black. The black was turning into hate.

"You bastard!" she ground out. "If my father ever gets to you he'll know just where to operate!"

"Jeez!" Bus was shocked. "What a brat. What are you punks coming to with such language? In my day girls of your age looked at funnies like Happy Hooligan and Little Nemo, they didn't talk like a Stockton Street hustler!"

"Sink it, you squared off snake," Judy jeered. "Where've you been for the last twenty years, in jail?"

The accidental shot floored Bus. In feeble retaliation he cracked, "I'm only worried your old man will pay us off to keep you. I couldn't stand that!"

Judy sensed she had Bus off balance and continued her diatribe. "You should have been flushed down the toilet nine months before you were born, you son of a baboon!"

"Boy," breathed Bus, "If I was your father I'd brain you."

"If you were my father I'd commit fratracide first, then suicide."

Utterly confounded and frustrated, Bus retreated. How did one cope with a child that spoke in the vernacular of a mule skinner.

CHAPTER SIX

The blossoming feud between Judy and Bus now developed into a full fledged conflict of wills. She detested him with all the loathing her youth could muster for a depraved human animal.

Bus tried to reciprocate with his brand of ineffectual sarcasm. Her scorn and penetrating insight into his degenerate nature defeated him. He began to shun his chores. When he could no longer neglect them without Len's noting, Bus determined he would not allow her to provoke him again.

"Is the Queen on her throne today?"

"What's for lunch, Dummy, hamburger again?"

"Nope, Hot Dogs today."

"Lord, don't you guys know anything besides Hot Dogs and Hamburgers?"

"Well, Countess, tomorrow the menu will be tacos and beans. I

hope that meets wit your Highness' approval." Bus curtsied cumbrously. "Or maybe you'd like some prime ribs and mushrooms, Madame? We shouldn't ought 'a give you nothin' to eat at all. It ain't required like. It's only outa the goodness of our hearts we feed you at all. If your old man don't get his ass outta that sling and produce some dough, you kin stay right here for forty years fer all I care!"

Judy checked her impulse to ask if they had heard from her father. Her sudden silence led Bus to believe he had scored and his tirade persisted.

"You ain't really worth ten cents dead or alive. I guess we'd been better off to've snatched an ape outa the zoo. He'd be easier to feed, give us no back talk, and wouldn't try no dumb tricks to get outta here. Probably be prettier too." Bus included slyly.

"If you had snatched a monkey you would at least feel at home with one of your kind. It would be like looking at a mirror all day, wouldn't it?"

"Aw, shut up! You make me sick, talkin' to a grown-up like that."

"Sure, you might just get tired seeing yourself as others see you, but at least you could talk the same language."

Bus's face began to get livid, she was getting under his thick hide again. "I oughta clout you one in your nasty mouth!"

"You touch me once more, you moronic anthropoid, and I'll watch you choke in that gassed up love seat in San Quentin!"

"Hoity-toity, listen to the wind blow!" Bus pranced around in a circle, holding his coat tails delicately.

"Yes," Judy continued, "I think I'll ask for a ticket to the show when they haul you through the little door. I can just picture the whole scene." Judy heaved a fake sigh resignedly. "They drag you screaming and clawing toward that green gas chamber. I'll bet the color would just match your bilious face!"

"You been seein' too many Cagney movies. They showed that one on TV. I seen it too. It sure would'a given them guys in Folsom a laugh."

Judy did not give an inch, she pressed her pseudo dramatic advantage to the limit.

"First they pull you out of your cell, your feet are dragging all the way down the corridor, your hands clutch at the bars. When you get to the end they open that door and there it is, the deadly squat!"

"Shut your nasty mouth, Damn you! I'll tell *YOU* why there ain't goin to be no such scene, because one little smart-ass girl is goin to be found in some lonely canyon a hundred miles from here. By the time your little dried-up decayed body is discovered and your Daddy identifies you, Little Bus and Len will be long gone, livin high off the hog with fifty grand to spend. Dames, clothes, and a Lincoln automobile. I

sometimes dream about them Lincolns, a pink convertible with tiger skin seats, a built-in bar and record player. That old dream is just about ready to come true, and it'll be almost worth puttin' up with you for a week!"

"Sounds great," said Judy, unimpressed. "Maybe I'd like to go along, if you were something other than a ringtailed, pockmarked Mongolian idiot!"

Bus laughed. "Go ahead Baby, try to insult me twenty-five grand worth. For that I can even suffer you!"

"Don't start spending it yet, you clown. At least wait 'til you collect."

"Crap!" In twenty-four hours you won't see us for dust!"

"I'd hate to have to describe what that dust flying at your heels will consist of."

"For a fourteen year old chick, you got the imagination of a burlesque comic."

"You're only twenty years behind the times, Buster."

"Where'd you hear my name." Bus asked in astonishment.

"I didn't, but if it's that, that's it."

Bus shook his tousled mane and exited in exasperated defeat.

Judy looked at her distorted reflection in the cracked bathroom mirror. Two bruised and blackening eyes stared back. She retrieved what was left of her shattered compact and with the puff and a residue of powder, tried to repair her abused face.

She realized now, a message *MUST* be conveyed to someone outside. She harbored no illusion that these two would permit a surviving witness to provide police with their descriptions. Bus' imaginative portrayal of her immediate future was more a reflection of their actual intentions than a mere fairy tale to frighten her. Time was slipping by. She devised and discarded half a dozen ideas. The most practical plan came to her next morning.

She tore a page from her Geography book and fashioned a paper glider. She launched it experimentally. It was not balanced and flew poorly. Judy fastened a paper clip to the nose and tried again. It performed better, but further trails improved it to the point where she was impelled to send one on it's way. With her lipstick she imprinted the shortest message she could devise. She decided upon, HELP I'M UP HERE J.R. It represented a blurry dispatch designed to attract the attention of some curious eye.

She supposed that by this time every newspaper would be featuring the story of missing Judy Rossiter. Her initials alone should excite the dullest reader. Her father wielded considerable influence in the community. Mention of his name would attract public attention and sympathy.

She tried another glider and weighted the nose with a blob of masticated gum. This one flew beautifully. She watched its progress as

it descended, still in view. Turning, bumping, twisting diving and flying—finally reaching the air over the street, it took a great updraft and sailed serenely to the park.

Encouraged, but apprehensive of her captors sudden appearance, she folded more of the tiny aircraft. From her purse she extracted more gum and chewed industriously. She also took out her perfume to eradicate the unpleasant odors in the room. Unstopping the bottle she accidently tipped it over on her geography book.

"Damn," she ejeculated, retrieving the bottle. No matter, the place smelled much better. In a constant barrage she tore out pages and sent message after message, unaware of where they might land. "Bread on the Waters," she quoted from her Sunday school lessons. They may have rained on the street, in the park or down below in the alley as far as she could discern. As a pencil, her lipstick soon became useless, worn to the metal sheath. She used her eyebrow pencil next until it was blunted to the wood. Judy persevered until dusk, exhaustion and the evening meal time approached.

As darkness moved into the dreary room, Judy rested on her cot and pondered her plight further.

Bus's antipithy was not to be discounted. Intuitively she feared him. Thoughtfully she picked up one of the empty coke bottles and took it into the bathroom. On the edge of the iron tub she gave the neck a quick crack. It snapped off. Pointed toward the top was a viscious jagged edge. She at least had a makeshift weapon. Concealing it under her brown blanket against future necessity, she settled down to try to read in the dimness and await her evening hamburger.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Len carefully noted landmarks indicating the approach to a little dirt road leading off to the right of the highway. The two roads, separated by a six foot hedge of Oleanders paralleled each other for half a mile. The blossoming bushes screened the narrower route from the thoroughfare. Len had timed the distance from the little lane to the Icy Freeze Drive In Restaurant many times at varying speeds. He ascertained twenty-five miles an hour and ten minutes elapsed time as correct for the measured distance. This was the key to the pickup.

Len drove back to his Richmond District room in San Francisco and wrote a letter.

Dr. Rossiter: (it read)

So far you have behaved admirably. Judy is O.K. To prove to you we have her she told us her mother's middle name is Catharine and her grades this semester were straight A's except Geography, which was B—. We will give you her Geography book also for proof. Here is how to get her back. Tomorrow go to your bank, get $50,000 in used bills,

10's, 20's, 50's and 100's. Don't bother to mark them or register serials, you haven't the time. Don't inform the police, the F.B.I. or the newspapers. Tie the bills in $1000 packages. Wrap them all in heavy brown paper, tie with strong string.

Lock it in the trunk of your car till tomorrow afternoon. At Six sharp leave your house and drive to the Icy Freeze Drive In on Vermont Avenue. Leave both your front windows down. You can go in for a cup of coffee but sit where you can't see your car.

At six fifteen, go back to your car. Pick up the envelope on the seat. It will tell you where to drive and leave the money. Don't forget, one of us will always be with Judy. Any attempt to trick or follow us will be fatal for your daughter. When we have the money we will tell you where to find Judy.

You Know Who

Len sealed and stamped the envelope, drove back to Burlingame and dropped it in a mail box. He wanted it to bear a local postmark.

Back again in San Francisco, Len looked in on Judy. She was sleeping with her face to the wall. He backed out silently. Bus was on his cot snoring. The whiskey bottle was almost empty. Len sat for a while re-examing the day's progress. "So far, no slip-ups," he concluded.

Except for Bus's alcoholic nightsong, the night was a quiet one.

Bus awoke early. The primus lighted, he splattered cold water on his hangover. Len came awake and got up to dress. "Wonder how the girl's holding up."

Bus glanced at Len through half opened and bleary eyes.

"All right, I guess, except for her smart mouth."

"Go down and get her some corn flakes and milk. We got sugar here. Bring some orange juice. You look like you could stand some too."

Bus snorted. "How long we gotta' stay here. I'd like to go out and get a decent meal for once!"

"We should have the money by seven o'clock tonight. Get packed, we'll be on our way by eight."

"You got those reservations and passports?"

"Yes, right here. Take yours, hold on to it, and you'd better study it so you won't forget your name."

Bus accepted the reservation and passport. "What's my name?"

"You are Thomas Duncan when you walk up to the ticket office, your passport reads you are an oil worker, hired by Stickley Oil Company, to explore the interior of Argentina for oil."

"So I'm an oiler, whadda I do if they ask me questions?"

"What questions? In Argentina they don't ask too many questions as long as you bring American dough."

"I'll feel a lot better when we got that money and get on that plane."

"Don't worry, we've got five days to get there."

"Think the heap will make it?"

"With fifty thousand bucks, should we worry?"

"I keep fergittin', that would buy a lot of Thunderbirds."

"We'll drive to Miami. If the cops should get a tip, all the airlines will be covered. We can take side roads and still make it easy.

"I'll get something for us and the kid to eat."

Bus left yawning widely. Still yawning he returned with bags of food in both arms.

"You feed that tiger this time," Bus said. I'll pour us some coffee." Len carried Judy's food to her room. She was awake but still in her bed. She tossed her dark tousled hair back. Sleepily she followed Len's movements.

"Here's something to eat," Len smiled.

"Thanks loads," Judy replied. She threw back her blanket.

"Where's old fish face?"

"You ought to try to get along with Bus," Len admonished. "He's really alright, maybe just a little crude."

"CRUDE!" Judy cried. "If he were any cruder, he'd still be an embyro!"

Len laughed. "I guess we deserve that for abducting a doctor's daughter."

Len went back to Bus. "I've still got a few things to do, but I'll be back around ten."

Bus, still yawning, sat down to his second cup of coffee liberally slugged with bourbon. Could he *really* trust Len? Fifty thousand dollars and a head start might tempt many an honest crook. Still, considering further, it wouldn't make sense. Left to take the rap he could finger Len and his destination in a minute. He swilled the coffee royal and turned to reading some provocative girlie magazines. Len was still not back at eleven, so Bus went out to bring Judy's noon meal.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Don arrived at the Rossiter residence at eight twenty. He parked his green Thunderbird in the driveway beside the Doctor's Cadillac and raced to the front entrance. His ring was unnecessary, Celia opened the door before he had a chance to press the chimes button. Alma rushed into his arms and buried her face on his shoulder.

Rossiter followed, pale and shaken to take Don's hand in a grip of desperation. Inside, the story related to Don was simple. Judy was missing, a ransom note had appeared. "I didn't know what to do, Don, except to call you." Rossiters's countenance was set grimly. Don asked him to repeat the story with as much detail as possible. The doctor waited anxiously for Don's reaction.

"Let me see that letter," Don asked. He studied it for several minutes.

"This was written by an intelligent but only fairly well-educated man," Don announced. "The

handwriting tells nothing in itself, any expert could fake the style. I would judge he is a professional. The wording is studied."

"This was a well planned and executed kidnapping. I think whoever did this is serious and determined. Much as it is against my principle and training to pay off ransom, I think Emmett you had better make the arrangements in the manner they have asked. Let's get Judy back and worry about their capture later."

Rossiter sighed in great relief. "It's such a comfort for us to get an expert opinion, Don. I'll get to the bank first thing tomorrow."

The next morning Rossiter left his house at ten and drove directly to his Burlingame bank. He asked to see Burton, Vice President and an old and valued friend. Ushered into Burton's office, he took his outstretched hand and came immediately to the point.

"Ed, please don't delay me with needless questioning. This is an emergency. I must have fifty-thousand dollars, right away, in used bills of small denominations. I want them tied in bundles in heavy paper tied with strong cord. You know I'm good for this so please don't frustrate me by being too inquisitive. Will you do it?"

Burton's mouth dropped open like a gasping trout. For the first time in his imperturable banker's career, his composure deserted him.

"Wha-wha-what?"

"Look, Ed, You've known me for twenty years, my accounts are all at your bank. Do I get this in a hurry or not?"

Finally some comprehension began to override his shattered calm. Business instinct was restored and he was able to mouth, "Of course, Doctor, of course. I'll see to it at once."

Rossiter continued, "Don't try to register the serial numbers or make marks, Ed. I must have this money as soon as you can get it together. This has to be strictly confidential."

Burton gulped but appraised the situation in it's true light and left Rossiter sitting in his office to carry out the unusual request.

CHAPTER NINE

For lack of something to do, Judy searched through her purse. In it remained one rubber band for her hair. Her spilled perfume permeated the stale air. Everything stank of it.

Bus entered with the customary sandwiches. "Wow, what's that smell? It reminds me of a place I ain't been in for years."

"It's called 'I Will Find You.' Sort of prophetic, don't you think?"

Bus ignored the jibe.

"Well, Sweetheart, here's your dinner." He grinned ingratiatingly. "You ain't still mad at me are you? We got to get along for one more day, after that you can go home to your Mommy and Daddy."

Bus came over and sat beside Judy.

"I ain't so bad Baby, once you get to know me."

Judy edged away. She slid her hand under the brown blanket and grasped the coke bottle. Bus edged over beside her.

"Look, Kitten, I ain't goin' to hurt you. We ought to be friends, no use us fightin' all the time."

Bus put his arm around Judy's waist. His hand grasped a nubile breast and he pinched.

With the speed of a striking rattlesnake she jerked the bottle from under the covering and with all her might slashed at his face. She laid his cheek open from ear to jaw. Bus gave a yelp of surprise and pain.

He jumped erect, eyes staring in wide disbelief. He clapped his hand to his torn jaw, blood pouring between his fingers and over his clothes. He leaped away, now terrible in his anger but first concerned with the gravity of his injury. He ran from the room failing for once to relock the door. Judy tiptoed after and heard him cursing and splashing water in his room.

She opened her door a crack and peered down the dark empty hallway. Shoeless she silently sped toward the stairway. She descended steps two at a time until she brought up sharply at the first floor barrier. Retracing her route to the fourth floor, she raced along the upper hall again until she came to the back stairway. Down she flew, third floor, second floor—and ran headlong into Len coming up. He dropped his small package and snatched her wrist. Twisting it around her back he forced her to return upward step by step. Judy clenched her teeth against the pain and made his every move as difficult as she could. Len was silent, but his face was taut with suppressed anger. He shoved her into her room roughly. His eyes became slits at the sight of blood on the floor and over the cot. Grimly he released her, locked the door, and went to find Bus. He saw him in the bathroom blotting his bleeding face with paper towels and cursing vilely.

Len examined Bus' mutilated cheek and gritted, "What in Hell happened?"

Bus took time to answer. "That damned Hell cat, she slashed me with a broken bottle. Now look at my face!"

Len stepped closer and looked at the jagged wound, still flowing profusely. "I'll run down and get some antiseptic and bandages. Keep the bleeding down as much as you can."

A few minutes later Len returned and dressed the long gash. He stepped back to survey his handiwork.

"You sure you didn't try anything?" Len asked.

"Naw." Bus' bandaged jaw impaired his speech. "I just took in her lunch and she jumped me! Just wait, I'll fix her wagon—"

"Wait nothing," interjected Len with unaccustomed fury. "Leave that girl alone! This is strictly busi-

ness, not monkey business! Are you trying to blow the whole works now that we have it practically made? If you touch her again you'll answer to me! I haven't gone this far to let you screw it up. From now on I'll take care of her, you stay out of her room." Len turned on his heel savagely, leaving Bus to nurse his pain in a sulk.

Len went back to Judy's room. He was surprised to find her busy wiping up Bus' blood with paper towels. The old bathtub was cluttered with bright red and sopped toweling. She didn't look up as Len entered but persevered with her sanguine chore. Finally she spoke. "Keep that Damned imbecile away from me! I'll go hungry before *he* gets in here again."

Len sat on the chair reversely and leaned his arms on the back. "I'm sorry about this, Judy." He picked up a stick of gum from the table, took off the wrapper and popped it into his mouth. "Bus can be pretty mean if he's aggravated. He isn't likely to forget that."

"He should be glad," snapped Judy. "Anything would be an improvement on his ugly mug."

"Tell me Judy, just how did it happen?"

"The dirty bastard tried to get fresh. I was ready for him. I saw it coming the first day I got here, I was ready, that's all."

Len sighed and nodded. "I believe you Judy. I'll see it doesn't happen again. Anything you want?"

"Yes, I'd like a bath."

"You've got water, soap, and plenty of paper towels. Couldn't you take a sort of "spit bath?"

"With no door on the bathroom, and you guys tramping in and out at all hours? I haven't changed clothes in two days. I feel like ten cents worth of God Help Us."

"Well, O.K. Judy. It should all be over by tomorrow." Len took the gum from his mouth, wadded it and stuck it under the chair.

Judy was alone again. She had no misgivings about what she had done to Bus. She bitterly wished she had killed him. Paper missles continued to spiral down between the buildings.

More than ever, she now needed desperately to get a message to someone. Maybe she could improve the flying distance of her little gliders if she could catapult them like they did to airplanes off carriers. She took the last of her rubber bands from her hair. She made a notch in the nose of her latest creation and weighted it with a small wad of gum. Test hopping it in her room she was delighted with it's flying characteristics, a long high ratio glide. Judy tore more pages from her Geography book. With her new method of launching she was able to send them far beyond the opening between the buildings. She showered them to the street below. Some fell into the alley, some on the street to be flattened by passing cars. The pages from her book smelled to

Heaven with her spilled perfume. If someone would only be curious about the strange message on them and recognize it as a plea for help.

She fully expected quick and violent retribution from Len and Bus should they discover her efforts to escape. Sometimes utter discouragement assailed her. In these black moments she entertained the idea of calm submission until her ransom was paid. Then dispair of ever being freed predominated her thoughts. She doubted they would surrender her even after they had collected the money. She was the one person who could identify either or both. Bus would obviously be bent on retaliation for his hurt. Best perhaps to keep trying, even hopelessly.

CHAPTER TEN

A young couple arose from the shaded park bench holding the tiny hand of a thirteen months old toddler and strolled toward the intersection. Something in the gutter attracted the youngster's eye and he pulled his parents to a stop, squatted and picked up a paper object. It went at once toward his mouth but was quickly intercepted by the father. About to toss it back into the street some bright red lettering stayed his hand.

Transferring the child's fist to it's mother's hand, he unfolded the paper and read, "HELP I'M UP HERE J.R.". The crude printing on what appeared to be a strongly scented page from a school book seemed to indicate a note of distress. The man and his wife studied the communication skeptically. Again he made a move to throw it back into the street, then changed his mind at the approach of a uniformed policeman. The policeman examined the paper quizzically, smelled of it and stowed it between the pages of his notebook.

The couple with the child moved on.

Checking in at his station, the patrolman recalled the incident at the park and showed the puzzling article to his Captain.

Captain Gregg sat contemplating the odd message with the enigmatic letters, then lifted his phone.

"Get me Missing Persons, this is Captain Gregg. Hello, Gregg speaking. D'you have any M.P. reports with initials J.R.?"

"Nothing like that Captain, what have you got?"

"Guess it's just a prank. Lots of kids do stunts like this, probably means nothing. If anything comes in with those initials, call me."

"Will do Captain. What's it about?"

"Oh, it's a little paper airplane. Keller says someone handed it to him at Carter Park. Has some writing on it, says, help, I'm up here. Some initials, J. R.! Stinks of perfume of some sort. I'll file it."

No sooner had Captain Gregg rung off, than his phone buzzed.

"Captain Gregg."

"This is Don Preston, Captain."

"Well, Hello Don, how's the law business?"

"Captain, I've something of great importance to speak with you about. Can I come right over?"

"Sure Don, right now."

"I'll see you in ten minutes."

It was only eight minutes until Don was in Gregg's office. They shook hands and Don stated immediately. "Look, Captain, I've got a snatch case on my hands. I can't call in either the police or the F.B.I. yet. You've heard of Doctor Rossiter? His daughter has been kidnapped from their home in Burlingame and a fifty-thousand dollar ransom note received.

It warned not to call in the police or the F.B.I. Rossiter called me at once, and as an old friend I'm acting independently. I have a hunch they brought her to San Francisco, there's no logical place on the Penninsula to conceal her. They could easily get lost in the City. I need two good plain clothes men assigned to help me. Two I can trust to keep their mouths shut for a while. The Regional F.B.I. Director has given me a free hand until I get her back.

If the local police or newspapers get wind of it, God only knows what might happen to the girl."

"You say Don, it's Doctor Rossiter's daughter they have?"

"Yes, she was picked up somewhere near her home in Burlingame. Her books were found in the street about a block away from the house. That's where I figure she was nabbed."

Gregg sat straighter in his chair. "I guess I owe you a few favors, Don. Really this is police business, but not our Department if she was taken in Burlingame. I'm free only to offer some unofficial assistance here in San Francisco. I think Allen and Dahl would be your men. Both reliable and veterans in this sort of thing. Better let me deputize you though so you can legally carry a gun. I'll issue you a pistol too.

Subconsciously something kept nagging at the older policeman. He couldn't quite place it, but as he walked Don to the door it suddenly dawned upon him.

"Hey, wait a minute, what's that girl's name again?"

"Judy Rossiter."

"J.R., J.R., say, those are the initials on that piece of paper!"

Gregg went back to his desk and picked it out of a drawer. Don took it, read the printing and smelled the scent.

"Where did this come from?"

"Officer Keller said someone handed it to him near Carter Park in the Mission."

"I want to call her father, may I use your phone?"

Gregg waved airily. "Be my guest."

A moment later Don was speaking to Rossiter. "Doc, did Judy have any perfume with her when she disappeared?"

"Well, she shouldn't have, I've

forbidden her to put on that cheap stuff she affected. Why, do you have anything?"

"I'm working on a lead, nothing definite. But I need that information."

"I can't ask her mother just now, Don; she's still in shock, but Celia will know. I'll call her."

Don held on. After a moment Celia came on the line.

"Mr. Don? Doctor says you want to talk to me. Wh'd you want to know?"

"Celia, did Judy wear perfume?"

"I don' know if she wore any or not, but she sure like to put plenty on herself."

"What scent did she use?"

"She got a bottle on her dresser called, 'I'll Fin' You'. Oh Mr. Don, you goin' to bring back my Judy? I'll jus' die if you don't." Celia's voice broke.

"Don't cry Celia, I'll do my best. I've a slight clue and will have to hurry. Bye Celia."

He hung up and turned to Gregg. "Captain, who did you say the Officer was who brought in that paper?"

"Name's Keller, patrolman on that beat. He's off duty now but if you want to speak to him, I'll call."

"Please do."

Gregg placed the call, "Get Officer Keller on the phone for me."

A few minutes later his phone buzzed. "Captain Gregg here, Oh yes, Keller, I want you to talk to Mr. Preston and tell him what you know about that peculiar paper with the lipstick printing on it."

"Officer Keller, this is Don Preston. You say someone handed you this page, apparently from a school Geography book, near Carter Park? Who was it and where did they get it?"

"Oh, I see, a family said their child picked it out of the street. Their curiosity was piqued at the lettering and they handed it to you? Thanks very much, it could be of much importance."

Don turned again to Gregg. "This changes matters. I need another favor Captain. I'd like to borrow 'Ol Likker' for a few days. You know he's an old and trusted friend of mine."

"Of course, Don. I remember you used that dog on numerous occasions when you were with the Bureau. I'll call the Police Kennels and clear him for you. Good luck and if you need us holler."

Don, deputized and armed took the elevator to the basement. He was about to check out the famous bloodhound, 'Ol' Likker.' Lik as he was called for short, derived his unusual moniker, not from any predilection for alcohol, (his bloodshot eyes notwithstanding) but by an abstemious old maid in the Records Department. His registered name was 'OLD LIQUOR' however, she deemed it unforthright that such an improper cognomen should remain in her files. She changed it to 'Ol Likker,' accident-

ly calling him by an even more propitious name through his habit of greeting friends with a great dollop of wet slobbery tongue, which he endowed liberally upon unwary friend and quarry alike. Everybody was the object of his affectionate nature.

Ol Likker's more professional claim to fame accrued from his hyper-educated sense of smell. Ol Lik had participated in solving more notorious crime cases than many a veteran policeman. In his career he had sniffed out eleven lost children, several buried bodies and any number of fleet-footed criminals. If bloodhounds were acclaimed Artists in the field of olfactory mnemonics, Lik was a virtuoso. It was reported facetiously he could bury his head under water, follow a trail half a mile down stream and pick it up unerringly on the opposite bank! Lik had his training in a special police school. He was taught not to follow a given scent in full cry as most bloodhounds do. After recognizing a redolence he towed steadily and silently on his leash. Only his degree of haul indicated if or not he had the quarry's emanation fixed. Lik could single out an odor from a mixed dozen and steadfastly pursue the one he was directed to follow. The Federal Bureau of Investigation had borrowed him on many cases where he gave distinguished performances.

In spite of these honors he remained utterly disinterested in and oblivious of a dozen or so medals that graced the walls of the kennel office.

Lik met Don with unrestrained joy. "Hello Boy," Don stroked the pendulous ears and tried to dodge the customary sloppy greeting. Lik was signed out and his leash handed to Don. "Come on, old fellow, I think we've got a job for you."

The dog heaved his ninety-five pounds of bulk onto the back seat of Don's car, perfectly at home there, looking as happy as a dog with his dolorous countenance could, tongue lolling and dripping, impatient to get going.

Don pulled the Thunderbird into the traffic stream and headed toward Carter Park. He found a space and parked. Trailing obediently, Lik followed him to the park bench. Don seated himself, Lik flopped at his feet. Don unfolded a newspaper and pretended to read. Behind the obscurity of the paper he scanned the neighborhood. First he examined the empty warehouse, then the apartment building adjacent.

He chose the deserted looking apartment house as the most promising of the two for a hideout. One by one he studied each window on every floor.

Lik's big head rested on his paws, his droopy eyes closed as if he were asleep. A busy fly settled on his nose and trouped around. One eye opened and studied the fly. He

rolled the open eye up toward Don as if to question what to do about the intruder. Don brought the strange scented paper with the enigmatic note from his pocket and introduced it under Lik's black wet nose. The dog lifted his great head to sniff, then let it drop back again to it's resting place to resume his snooze.

Suddenly the head came up again, the ears as erect as any bloodhound's has a right to be. Sluggishly the big dog arose, nose extended and rather languidly he moved toward the high foliage behind the bench.

Don followed the beast's strange behavior with increasing interest. Lik disappeared under the shrubbery trailing his leash. Don's first reaction was, Lik was searching for a fireplug. Loud snuffling and the fast vanishing leash prompted Don to arise with alacrity and follow. Before he could stoop to see where the dog had gone Lik reappeared holding in his droopy jowls a duplicate of the paper Don held in his pocket. Don relieved the dog of his prize and smelled it. It reeked of the same aroma, possibly it was, 'I'll Find You.' Old Likker was also interested and insisted on further smelling. Don patted the dog and rolled his loose hide affectionately. From seemingly out of nowhere, a little paper glider drifted over the street, and plunged into the hedge at Don's back. Lik pulled at his leash forcing Don to follow. Together they retrieved another strange dispatch, same book, same wording, same scent! Don's words were mostly to himself, "I'll bet my next year's poker winnings she's around here somewhere. Come on, Lik, lets get some reinforcements."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At ten minutes past six, Len parked the old Buick a block from the Icy Freeze Drive Inn and slowly meandered toward the restaurant. He saw Rossiter's dark green Cadillac sedan pulled into a parking slot. Both front door windows had been rolled down. A covert glance about showed no one observing his movements and he swiftly slipped the envelope onto the front seat. He had meant to include Judy's curiously mutilated Geography book. In his nervousness it was forgotten in the Buick. Well, no matter, it was intended as an additional reminder to Rossiter, if his instructions were not followed to the letter. Len boldly passed into the eating place and seated himself at the counter. The waitress took his order for coffee and a cheese sandwich.

In a wall booth sat a nervous and worried man, before an untouched cup of coffee, trying hard not to look toward where his car was parked, even though not visible to him. Len believed Rossiter would never surmise his daughter's kidnapper would have the temerity to show himself so brazenly. The es-

tablishment was crowded and buzzing with conversation. At fifteen after six, Rossiter moved out of the booth and paid for his coffee. As he returned to his car he started visibly at the sight of the envelope on the seat. His hands trembling, over and over he read the peculiar back-slanted written message.

Dr. Rossiter:

I have you in sight. Drive *NOW* to the old Cranston road. If you have any cars following I shall know it, and the deal is off. Stay on Cranston to Delphi Lane and turn right. Hold your speed to fifteen miles an hour for one mile *exactly*. You will see a white cloth hanging on a bush, right side of the road. Stop and wait until no cars can be seen from either direction, then throw the package over the hedge.

Go right on home from there. As soon as we check the money we will release your daughter. So far you have been cooperative, keep it up a little while longer for your girl's sake.

The Ones Who Have Judy.

Len followed the green Caddy far enough to the rear so he could not be observed by Rossiter, and still could see if another car might be trailing the Buick.

As directed Rossiter turned on Delphi. Len speeded to forty-five and took the parallel road. At six thirty on the button a package came hurtling over the spot where a white cloth hung visible from both roads. Len pulled up sharply, jumped out and retrieved the brown parcel, bruised but intact. He thrust it into the Buick and sped away. He headed again toward El Camino Real. At the first crossover to the Bayshore freeway he lost himself in the thick parade of vehicles racing toward the City.

Approaching South San Francisco he turned on the car radio for news. A musical program bounced and rocked. Len kept close watch in his rear mirror for possible tails. He reckoned it highly unlikely he could be followed in the heavy traffic.

He began to relax and changed the radio dial to more soothing music. As he guided the auto in and out of the swift torrent of vehicles, he mused on the next order of business.

A fast overland drive to Miami. As a safety measure a change of license plates as soon as an opportunity was presented, one of the many planned to provide confusion.

Nearing Candlestick ball park he snapped to attention as he caught some words of a news break. Straining to hear, his face became ashen and in a rising panic began veering to the right lane to search for the nearest off ramp.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Preston, with Lik tugging at his leash strolled down the sunny side of the street fronting the old apartment building. Pausing at the dis-

reputable entrance, he looked it over, then man and dog ascended the worn cement steps. Don ignored the 'NO TRESPASSING' notice on the dirty glass door. He pushed at the dingy glass and entered the dark hallway. Pressing the button under the flyspecked sign "Caretaker." He listened to the faint buzz, and then the shuffling footsteps approaching the door. A wrinkled, unshaven old visage peered out cautiously. "Yeh?"

"My name is Preston. I'm looking for someone, are there any tenants here?"

"Ain't nobody left here but two famblys down the hall. They gotta get out next week too, buildin's gonna be tore down."

"Know their names?"

"One's Franklin, other's Perry. Men's workin' now, women folks 'r out too. No kids, famblys with kids already re-located. Gonna tear the buildin' down I said. Never did allow no dogs in here neither." said the old man looking at Lik with distaste.

"Well, thanks, Pop, guess that's all I need to know."

"Oh wait a minite, I fergot. They's two fellers on the upper floor. Workin fer some junk company, figgerin' out about some stuff to buy fer their boss. One's named Dooley, I fergit the other. They goes in and out the back door. I got his card here someplace. Nice feller, paid to stay here and didn't have to. Yep, name's Dooley, that's his card."

"Could I have this?" asked Don pocketing the card before the old man could object. "This might be the man I'm looking for."

He stopped at a phone booth and checked the yellow pages. Salvage, Used Iron, Plumbing Fixtures, used and new. A phony company—and a phony name too, Don guessed. He went back to his car. Allen and Dahl were smoking and waiting. "I think we've got something here. Two men are holed up on the top floor. They come and go by the rear entrance. The old man taking care of the building before it's demolished could only tell me about one of them, he's never seen the other. You and I, Allen will go up the front stairway. Dahl, if you'll cover the back, we may flush them. If they do have the girl up there we've got to use the utmost care she doesn't get hurt. I don't have to tell you boys to take care for yourselves too." Lik, Don and Allen re-entered the hallway. Starting up the stairway they were halted by the plywood barrier with the 'No Trespassing' warning. A couple of hefty kicks by the two men knocked it down. The old man, hearing the racket, opened his door a crack, saw them breaking down the obstruction, closed the door again, locked it and returned to his jug of wine.

After the clatter had subsided, the group continued up the steps as quietly as possible. They searched room to room, floor to floor until they reached the fourth level.

Like in broken-field running practice they sidestepped the filth and debris that littered the corridor. Eventually they arrived at the hallway's end and were confronted by the only closed off rooms on the entire floor.

Lik snuffled loudly at the door to the inner room. Don motioned Allen to stay behind him and he cautiously tried the knob. From inside a young girl's timorous voice queryed.

"Who is it?"

Don's heart leaped. He called in a loud whisper. "Is that you Judy?"

"Yes it's me, who are you?"

"Be quiet Judy, it's uncle Don, are you alright?"

"Oh yes, please hurry and get me out of here." Her voice began to rise.

"Shh, is there anyone around?"

"Yes, look out, there's a man in the room next door."

"Judy," Don whispered, "Get way back from the door and stay there, do you understand?"

"Yes, but hurry!"

Don pulled Lik back to the stairwell and looped his leash around the worn newelpost.

Bus heard the rustlings, the whisperings without understanding the words. Animal instinct warned him of danger. He tiptoed to the light switch and snapped it off, found his way to the open closet and stretched his hand to the top shelf. For a moment he fumbled until he touched the .45 automatic stashed there. Aiming directly at the door he listened and waited in the darkness. He knew the door was not locked. Anyone opening it unannounced would be silhouetted and blasted. Len was not due back for an hour yet. Somebody was getting nosey.

As hushed as possible, guns ready, Don and Allen crept to the adjoining room door. Don tried the knob with utmost care. It squeaked but was unlocked. Sinking to his knees he pressed the door open enough to insert his hand, reached up, flipped on the light switch and in one movement, flung the door open and fell flat to the floor. From the middle of the room came the flashing blast of the .45 and two shots roared over Don's head and into the hallway. Don and Allen shot twice each simultaneously. Bus took four slugs squarely in his chest. The pounding impact of the bullets drove him across the room backwards through the blacked-out window for a headlong plunge to the street below.

Two women conversing on the sidewalk glanced upward at a passing airplane. They screamed in unison as a body came hurtling to the pavement before them.

Bus was dead long before he hit the sidewalk and thus never did enjoy the thrill of his free-fall, or the terror that precedes an inevitable impact. The nauseating plop of his body and the resulting three foot bounce were relived in their nightmares for years. Luckily his body struck nothing in it's downward

path except the finality of the concrete.

Don and Allen rushed to the shattered window, silently praying no person was directly beneath when the body struck. They saw Dahl bending over the inert form. He had rushed up the alley at the sound of the shots and screams, taking immediate charge. Don ran back to where he had heard Judy's voice. Allen went to get Lik, even as a siren began to sound in the distance. Both men put their shoulders to the flimsy door and it snapped open. Judy flew into Don's arms sobbing hysterically. He soothed the weeping girl and glanced around her unclean prison. Lik had pulled Allen over to the rickety card table. He was practically crushing it with his great weight smelling noisily at the object of his hunt . . . the empty perfume bottle.

Don quieted Judy and was wiping her tearful face with his handkerchief when Dahl rushed in breathlessly.

He and Allen were examining something Dahl held. Don seated Judy on her chair, telling her to be patient for a few minutes before taking her home.

Dahl was holding a cheap new wallet. It contained a passport made to a Thomas Duncan, a ten dollar bill and a plane reservation in the same name for a flight to Buenas Aires, scheduled to leave Miami at three in the afternoon of September 10th.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Len strained for every word as the news announcer continued:

"—this afternoon three law enforcement officers entered an abandoned apartment building in the Mission District and released Judy Rossiter, fourteen-year-old daughter of a prominent San Francisco doctor, missing and held for three days pending a ransom demand. Buster Dutton, ex-convict, was shot to death during the rescue. He fell four stories to the sidewalk. The girl is in good health despite a beating by one of the men. Through fingerprints, Dutton was identified as a felon recently released from Folsom, where he had served a two year term for burglary. Police say a ransom was paid. The second man in the case is being sought. The girl is being questioned by the F.B.I. and Burlingame police. At home, she is resting after her ordeal."
"This has been a Special Bulletin."

Len pressed down on the accelerator and rolled toward San Jose. At the outskirts he pulled into a service station. The attendant checked the gas, oil and water. As Len paid the bill he asked for a U.S. Map. Nearby he stopped at an army surplus store, just preparing to close, bought a wrench, a screwdriver, a canvas water bag, some yellow paint and a small lettering brush.

Wasting not a moment he reentered Highway 101 and continued Southward. At Gilroy he

turned Eastward toward 99, the inland route to Los Angeles.

He passed through Fresno, then Bakersfield and on to San Bernardino. Darkness made his going a little slower but safer. At a Beaumont motel he stopped for a shower and several hours rest. An all night coffee shop provided food that refreshened him sufficiently to drive on to Phoenix. At one point he was startled to read a road sign that read "MIAMI 32 MILES," then wry ly he remembered there was a "MIAMI" in Arizona. He wished fervently it was the Miami of his destination.

The car radio gave out no further information of California news. The local stations played Western or Rock and Roll Music. It served however to keep him awake. After a while the white center line began to weave from side to side.

The road unreeled like an endless ticker tape, punctuated only by road signs indicating, 35 mile zone, slow to twenty-five, junction ahead. His thirst was becoming unquenchable. The water in the new desert bag turned brackish. He piled iced coke packs beside him on the seat and drank of them incessantly.

Miles whizzed by but his fatigue was not to be denied, he must rest. Another off the road motel gave him a few hours respite. Back on the Highway again. El Paso, Fort Worth, Dallas passed in monotonous review.

As Len drove, his thoughts reverted to the events of the past three days. Where did they go wrong? How could the police have discovered where the girl was hidden? Trying to unravel these perplexing questions passed the time on the wearisome, tedious journey. He wasted no regrets on Bus' death, he was proving to be a liability anyway. He was wary of the State Patrol cars he passed traversing the many States, but none challenged him or gave a second glance at the Buick and it's sole passenger.

He decided nevertheless to switch his license plates. If an All Points Bulletin had been issued, he might run into some Patrolman curious about his California tabs. On the outskirts of Shreveport he stopped at a vast autowrecking yard. Entering the small grease smeared office he addressed a man in dirty coveralls.

"Do you have a rear door handle for a '59 Buick?"

"I think so, see that fence way in back? About the third car over, green one, go out and take it off, pay here."

Len went back to his car to get his wrench and screwdriver. He passed through the office into the lot crowded with crashed and cannibalized automobiles. He soon located the demolished Buick and removed the door handle. Furtively he looked about until he found two white and blue Florida plates on a wrecked Ford. He quickly removed

them and tossed both over the high fence into some underbrush. Returning to the office he asked the mechanic, "How much?"

"About a buck, plus tax."

Len paid and went to his car. Driving around the corrugated tin building he followed a road leading along the fence where he had thrown the plates. Getting out he quickly retrieved them and drove on. Before crossing the Mississippi to Vicksburg, he found a Motel at Tallulah for the night. After dark he removed his California plates, washed and dried them, and with yellow paint he altered the lettering and numbering. Originally his license read: HUP 319. He made the H into a B, the U into an O, and the P into an R. Next he changed the numerals. Len filled in the 3 to read as 8, the 1 to a 4 and the 9 to an 8. He now had BOR 848.

They couldn't stand sharp inspection, but they were changed enough to divert attention in case his car had been observed and the number recorded. He put the Florida plates on the Buick and went to bed.

By seven the next morning he had eaten breakfast, checked the car and was on his way. Driving in the cool of the morning his spirits soared upward and he felt almost gay. He even sang a little.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The reunion scene at Judy's house resembled the homecoming of a teenage beauty queen. Wrapped in a light blue silk housecoat, she sat in royal splendor, a Prima Donna with two black eyes, reigning regally for the half dozen reporters and several magazine editors, each bidding for the exclusive story of her adventure.

Her father suspected inwardly that his daughter was enjoying the celebrity bit a little *too* much. He placed a flat NO to all offers.

"We are all so happy to have Judy back safely there will be no payment for her story." he stated.

Alma was radiant, Celia was still in tears. Judy had related her experiences first to Don and the Federal men, then to the local police and lastly to the newspapers. Don soon dismissed them all except for the F.B.I. men. They took Judy aside from some acute questioning.

"Now Judy," began Don. "Your fun is over. We have to ask questions that bear directly on that missing man. I want you to give us a very accurate description of him, how he looked, how he dressed, the color of his hair and eyes, and anything else you can recall."

"Well, Uncle Don, he was nice to me, not like that other awful one. He talked a lot better, more cultured like and calm. He was clean and had a nice smile."

"Get down to facts, Judy. What color hair, eyes, clothes?"

"His hair was dark brown, but I noticed it was a little grey at the roots, like it had been dyed. He

wore a neat mustache, the same color as his hair. He kept his shoes polished too."

"How tall would you say, Judy?"

"Like Daddy maybe, but thinner."

"How old would you think he is?"

"I don't know, maybe fifty."

"Did he wear a ring or other jewelry?"

"No, I didn't see any, except he had a wristwatch, a gold one."

"Any scars?"

"Not him, but that other one did, and I gave him a good one too."

Don made no comment about this.

"This one man, he left some underclothing and personal effects behind, we've kept watch on the place but he hasn't returned. He'll need to buy things before long. We haven't located any worthwhile evidence as yet as to who he might be, but the San Francisco Fingerprint Detail is working on it right now. Did you notice, Judy, if this man handled or touched anything of glass while in your room?"

"No, not that I remember, he wore gloves most of the time. Once he came in and sat down to talk to me,—that was after I cut the ugly one. That time he forgot his gloves. He chewed a stick of my gum and then stuck it under the chair."

At this, Don leaped for the phone.

In a few minutes Gregg was on the line. "Captain, are your finger print men in that room yet?"

"They just left here, Don. What's new?"

"The girl just told me that the missing man came into her room without his gloves. He chewed some of her gum and stuck the wad under the chair. If this is so it should have a perfect print on it."

"I'll get them on the radio right now and call you back."

Don hung up with a sigh of relief and turned to the others. "That's a break, if they find the gum. Ten to one he's on file someplace or he wouldn't have been so cautious. I'll bet he didn't leave any in his room either—too smart for that." One of the Federal men spoke. "This looks like a real planned and professional job. It was bungled due to the little girl's astuteness. It's Federal business now, she was kidnapped and sustained harm. California's Little Lindberg Law is activated too."

Don addressed Judy again. "Tell us what you did with your Geography book."

Judy recounted her efforts to reveal the location of her prison. "I made little paper airplanes out of the pages. Gee, I must have torn out two dozen. I tried to get them to fly across the street to the park. Some did but most fell into the alley below or on the street. I guess I must have got some into the park though, 'cause you found me."

"How did they come to have your perfume on them?"

"I tried to make that room smell better, then I tipped the bottle over

on the book. I didn't think it would be as important as it turned out to be. I thought that if my name would get into the papers and if the pages were recognized as from my Geography, with my initials and perfume on them, somebody might get curious. Gee, I sure tore heck out of that book. Daddy will have to pay for it."

Don and the Federal men laughed. "Pretty tricky," Don remarked. "I guess we'll have to put you on the force,—in the same kennel with Ol' Likker!"

Judy giggled at that. "How I love that dog," she squealed. "Would you let me come down and pet him sometime?"

"Sure, sure, you can pay him a visit when we get this case finished. That animal surely has acute sense of smell."

"He has a cute tail, too." Judy snickered at her feeble pun. Don continued his conversation with the F.B.I. men. "I figure this Dutton to be the strong arm man. The one we want had the brains. If he heard the broadcast that Dutton was killed, he wouldn't return to that apartment, but would light out for parts unknown."

"We have no description of his car or plates. If we can get his prints identified we'll at least know who we are looking for."

"We could try the State Vehicle records, but certainly he wouldn't register his car under his right name."

Don went on with his theorizing. "This man collected the ransom at about 6:30 according to Doctor Rossiter. The news broadcast came on the air at 7:00. If it was his intention to come back, release Judy and pick up his partner and he heard that broadcast, he wouldn't tarry around. He's hiding out somewhere or driving madly to get out of the area."

The second Federal man rose and stretched. "I think the best we can do tonight is to get some rest, wait for the fingerprint report and start out again tomorrow."

"One more thing," Don said. "In Dutton's wallet was a reservation for an air flight passage to Buenas Aires. He had a cleverly forged passport under another name. The reservation was genuine enough but also in the same name. There being no extradition agreement between Argentina and the United States, his partner would, in my view, undertake to leave for there also. This means the missing man had planned it all as a two man operation. Dutton didn't seem to be a quiz kid in the brain department. Now this guy, whoever he is, is in a panic. All that is left for him to do is to get out of the country quick. We can put a stake-out on all air lines out of San Francisco but we don't know who to watch for. The date on Dutton's ticket read September 10. They may not have intended to take the same flight out, but it's logical they would. The missing man now has $50,000 instead of only half that

amount. Judy's description of him convinces me he had altered his appearance, so he is known to authorities somewhere."

The phone rang and Celia answered. "Rossiter residence, Miss Judy is home now. You want Mr. Don? Yes he's right here."

Don took the telephone. "Hello, Oh, Gregg." He listened, then repeated. "Len Ringley, forger extraordinary, released from Folsom in July. Thanks Gregg, this is the first lead. He's got to be our man. Have you put out an A.P.B? Good, I've a hunch he'll try to make his plane flight out. State Patrol cars might keep a lookout, but for a man we can't recognize. He's due in Miami in three days, he could just make it driving night and day, or he could fly. Driving is his best bet though, there's a thousand side roads to keep out of sight, or he could lose himself in traffic on the Freeways. He might, if he saw time running out, stop at some out of the way airport and hire a plane to fly him the rest of the way."

"If he did that," one of the Federal men interposed, "his abandoned car would be spotted and eventually some questions raised."

"There's lots of ways he could lead us into guessing he'll do one thing and then switch to another." The other F.B.I. agent said.

"So," Don got up and stretched too, "let's all get some sleep and start fresh in the morning."

At six a.m. Don's phone rang and he answered sleepily. At the words that sounded in his ear he was jolted into a frenzy of action.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Len rolled over the hot and dreary miles his fertile imagination began the germination of an idea. He needed a little more time for insurance. He would act under the presumption that an All Points Bulletin had emanated from the San Francisco Police and perhaps the F.B.I. as well. He felt certain no one had as yet penetrated his disguise or established his identity. The kidnap car was probably anonymous too.

If he picked up a hitch-hiker who remotely resembled himself, put his plan in motion, he could then gain some respite.

He passed up half a dozen before he saw a slender middle-aged man with a battered suitcase, standing beside the highway, thumb outstretched. Len braked to a stop several yards beyond the transient. Breathlessly the individual trotted to the car and entered the old Buick.

"Sure do thank you Mister, it's a mighty hot day and I've gotta make Miami tonight."

Len smiled. "It sure IS hot. We ought to be in Miami by dark. Name's Dooley." He offered his hand. "Put your suitcase in back." "Mine's Carson, Miles Carson. Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Dooley. I'm going to work at the Space Center starting tomorrow."

Small talk continued but Len's mind was double thinking in another vein. As he drove he kept watch for a proper site for the scheme he had contrived. At last he came to a promising stretch. A mile of clear visibility in either direction, a small bridge at the base of the downward slope and a shallow climb beyond. The span was short but it crossed a deep rocky chasm.

At a wide place in the road Len pulled far to the right. The sudden slamming of the brakes sent his passenger's head forward to the dash. At that instant Len swooped the heavy crescent wrench from the seat beside him and struck savagely. The man slumped down soundlessly. Len gave another vicious slash at his head for good measure and set the brakes. He jumped from the car, reached over and pulled the limp body into the driver's position. He opened the trunk of the Buick and removed his suitcase containing the money and Judy's mutilated school book. Opening his victim's suitcase he transferred the cheap soiled underclothing to his own bag and threw it into the back seat along with Judy's book. He placed the money package in the suitcase that belonged to Carson, keeping a sharp outlook for passing cars he hurriedly installed his California plates and put the blue and white ones with the suitcase in the rear seat. He threw the bloody wrench far into the underbrush. He forced himself to extract the wallet from the back pocket of the dead man, saw in it only a few dollar bills. He removed most of the money from his own wallet, left the business cards, the fake driver's license in it and stowed the flat wallet in the inside pocket of the corpse. He released the brakes and guided the wheels down the slope until they were aimed directly at the bridge. As the car gathered momentum he jumped back, slammed the door, and watched.

It picked up speed toward the bridge. It hit directly, tearing out the rail and with a rending crunch of tortured metal, crashed through and tumbled upside down into the boulder strewn gorge below.

Pleased with the performance, Len picked up the stranger's suitcase and walked crisply down the hill and across the bridge. Passing the smashed guard rail he reluctantly looked down at the Buick. No one could have survived a crash like that he surmised. Departing the ugly scene he continued smartly up the hill. He deliberately kicked dust on his shoes and trousers, counterfeiting a travel-stained hitchhiker. Only when he was out of sight of the wrecked bridge did he pause for a moment and sit on the suitcase for a breather. He prepared himself to dodge into the roadside brush at the sound of a car. Resuming his pace he covered more than a quarter mile before he heard the approach of an automobile. It was coming up fast from the bridge.

Len assumed the classic stance of the professional hitchhiker, thumb outstretched, an expectant look on his face. He wasn't quite prepared for the success of his first try. An elderly man invited him into his car and at once excitedly related the story of an accident he had just passed.

"Real bad wreck back there, car went through the bridge rail and landed upside down in the creek. I stopped with another car and we looked down at it them other people are going back to tell the Police. Don't seem no ambulance is goin' to be necessary, just the dead wagon. Poor devil's either killed or drowned. We could just see him from the busted railing."

"Nothing I could do so I came on. I hate to see them accidents. Too bad," Len sympathized. "The way some people drive nowadays, though, I don't wonder. Going all the way to Miami?"

"Yep. That where you're headed?"

"I'm looking for work at the Space Center. I'm in electronics. Came from Texas, worked in Huston for a spell."

"Lots of jobs open for technical men there. Where do you want to get out?"

"Anywhere near Miami. I have to get cleaned up a bit before tomorrow." Several miles further Len spotted a large shopping center across the highway from an imposing hotel.

"Right here will do," he said to the driver. "Thanks for the lift."

"Good luck with your job."

Len took his suitcase from the back of the car, waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the highway. Inside the hotel the desk clerk frowned at Len's soiled suit and dusty shoes. His countenance brightened at the currency exposed in Len's wallet. He signed the register, 'Miles Carson', whose identification he now carried. Waving off the eager bell hop who reached for his bag, he shook his head and tossed the boy a quarter.

Bewildered for a second, the boy shrugged and pocketed the coin. Len purchased a quart of bourbon at the liquor shop and took the elevator to his room.

Alone behind the locked door, he was for the first time, able to minutely inspect the wrapped parcel of money. He broke the tough string and unwrapped the layers of dusty and bruised but intact covering. There spread out on the bed before his fascinated gaze lay fifty thousand dollars in resplendent green United States currency.

Jubilantly he flipped though one of the packets revealing bills of ten, twenty, fifty and one hundred dollar denominations. They spelled 'freedom and luxury,' the twin goals of his elaborate venture. Splitting one package of the money he placed half in his wallet and re-wrapped the rest. He stuffed it into the old suitcase and pushed it far under the bed.

After his shower he glanced into the mirror at his unshaven face. Brushing his clothing and wiping off his shoes as best he could, he drank a double shot of the firey bourbon, descended to the lobby, and called a cab.

Along the neon lighted walkway of the mammoth aggregation of stores, he moved from shop to shop, meticulously selecting the finest quality and style of shoes, suits, shirts, underwear and accessories. At eight thirty he returned to his room carrying, with the cabbie's help, two elegant pieces of luggage, one packed tightly with his newly acquired sartorial splendor. The second bag had room in it reserved for a special bundle, at the moment lodged under his bed. The occasion called for a few more drinks, then shaved and impeccably attired, he repaired to the coffee shop for a leisurely and relaxed dinner.

At ten o'clock, the softly playing radio announced the hourly Miami news. Len listened. After some neighborhood tidings the announcer continued: "—a motorist was killed late this afternoon on the Naples-Miami highway when his car unaccountably crashed through a bridge railing and into a creekbed forty feet below. The body was tentatively identified as 'Kelvin Dooley', representative for a California salvage firm. Highway officers are questioning some of the circumstances surrounding the accident. An investigation will follow."

The station went on with other local news. Len finished his dinner, returned to his room, and went to bed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ol' Likker was never enthusiastic about flying. When his leash was handed over to a baggage attendant and he was shoved unceremoniously by his rear into his traveling cage, he spraddled out and looked reproachfully at Don. In his canine way of thinking he might have regretted he had not been whelped a seeing-eye dog so he could ride in the passenger compartment with Don.

The four hour flight for Don and the two Federal men was occupied mostly with briefing them on the unexpected developments in the Rossiter case. After takeoff the three settled back and Don related the reason for this frantic flight.

"Gregg called me this morning about six," he proceeded. He said he had just gotten a teletype from Florida State Highway Patrol. A car with California License plates went over the side of a bridge near Naples. The only occupant, a man, was killed. When the car was hauled out of the ravine the body was supposedly identified by a California drivers license and some San Francisco addressed business cards.

The license was checked by the Motor Vehicle Department, and here it comes, fellows. THERE

WAS NO SUCH LICENSE NUMBER EVER ISSUED."

Both Federal men blew out their breath in unison, "W-H-E-E-U!"

Don went on. "—and I'm not through yet. The name 'Kelvin Dooley' is as phony as his drivers license. The California plates had been expertly altered with yellow paint into a meaningless jumble of letters and numbers. Only on close inspection would they be exposed as fakes. Gregg posted them on our missing man. They agreed it might be he, killed while rushing to make the Miami flight.

Don continued. "I'm still not satisfied. There was no sign of the ransom money on his person or in the car. The Highway Officers arrived at the accident scene about twenty-five minutes after it had been reported. Hardly enough time for a passerby to climb down to the wreck and get the money out even had they known it was in the car. Some other peculiar facts were evident. The drivers head had been bashed in. The Coroner says it doesn't look to him like a part of his accident injuries. No fingerprints could be gathered from the interior of the watersoaked car, but the dead man's fingerprints do not match those we got from the gum under Judy's chair."

"So you're of the opinion the whole accident was part of a frame?" asked one F.B.I. man.

"It certainly could be. This Len Ringley is resourceful and ingenious. He needed time, and I think he was forced to choose murder to gain it. I think he's still trying to make that plane. I called the air terminal in Miami and there are more than sixty passengers booked out on the flight, none named Kelvin Dooley."

"Are you figuring a stakeout on the passengers as they check in?"

"Yes, though we don't know what he looks like now. He's changed his appearance. I've got some mug shots of Ringley with me and they may help. I brought Ol Lik along too. The Miami Airport Manager has been most cooperative. The thing that bugs me most is that missing money. If it had been found inside the wreck we wouldn't have to look an inch further.

I just can't see him parking it any place, he'll keep it with him constantly. The fact that there was some money in that dead man's wallet sounds a little like a small red herring tossed in for good measure.

With fifty thousand dollars in your kick what's a twenty dollar bill or so if it provides him with a day's delay while we investigate a routine auto accident."

"No doubt about it, he's running scared."

"Flight 44, San Francisco to Miami, E.T.A. six hundred hours September nine."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Len stepped to the wall phone, called the Air Terminal and con-

firmed his flight out at three p.m.

He lunched well, natty in his immaculate raiment. As a final chore he tightly wrapped the bundle of currency in his fresh underclothing, packed it securely in one of his new suitcases, locked the bag and strung the key around his neck with the solicitude attending the donning of a St. Christopher medal.

Wearing his spruce new topcoat and toting the sparkling luggage, Len boarded the elevator down to the lobby, paid his bill and sought a taxi.

Thirty minutes after two the cab drew into the drive-around entrance to ARM Airlines. Out on the field jets thundered taking off. The cabbie carried his heavy bags up the steps to the waiting room. Queues were forming at ticket counters and Len searched for the proper line. Outside on the loading ramp, lines of baggage were beginning to snake upward in single file toward the gaping belly of a colossal jet, poised before the passenger gate. Mechanics swarmed like termites in and out of the gigantic bird preparing it for the long overwater flight. Ports were breached and white coverall garbed men checked and released control locking devices and removed chocks. Trim and pert stewardesses stationed themselves at either side of the passengers roll-up stairway, prepared to greet the first aboard.

Inside the ARM waiting room the lines progressed slowly. In one, a well dressed man lugging two handsome bags shuffled along as his line advanced. Arriving at the ticket counter he placed his two suitcases on the floor level scales at his right and proffered an envelope.

Behind the uniformed reservation clerk, a man in shirtsleeves sat at a desk shuffling papers. He eyed each passenger as they stepped up to the counter, then dropped his eyes to the three photographs on the desk.

The big dog at his feet raised his magnificent head and pointed it toward one of the suitcases on the scale. Languidly he pulled his heavy body erect and moseyed toward the bags. He snuffled loudly at one of them, then turned his head to look back at shirtsleeves. Shirtsleeves watched the dog's actions, then suddenly stood up, walked to the scale and tied a red tag to the handle of one. Stepping out of the cubicle he moved toward the man first in line. Touching the man in the grey overcoat on the shoulder he inquired pleasantly, "Hello Len, going someplace?"

Len stood motionless with his eyes closed. Before he had opened them the two Federal men closed in from two sides. Each grasped an arm and handcuffs snicked. Don held out his hand for the suitcase key. Without speaking, Len motioned toward his chest. Don retrieved the key from beneath the lagoon blue shirt and Len was led away through the startled passen-

gers. They milled and buzzed about like a file of disturbed ants.

Don went back of the counter and unlocked the tagged bag. He uncovered the object of the long chase. From it emanated a faint aroma of perfume. It was 'I'll Find You.'

Lik burrowed his wet nose into the bag and rooted at it's contents. The tired man pulled his coat from the chair back, donned it, picked up the suitcase and addressed the dog. "Come on, Snoopy, lets go home."

Ol Likker, trailing his leash frolicked elephantinely at Don's side, endowing his hand with a great slushy kiss as he reached and picked up the leather. Lik strained against the leash, his splayed feet sliding and scrabbling on the polished floor.

It was probably only coincidental, but Lik' black nose was pointed directly toward San Francisco.

NO FAIR!

BY B. J. STARR

The victim was a cool one alright . . . too cool. The gunman should have thought twice.

Don't bother to raise your hands. Just open the safe and give me all the money."

"Okay, let me finish my coffee first."

I peered over my desk at him as he stood with his back against the closed door. He seemed a little nervous, but the automatic in his hand was pointed steadily at my chest. In his late twenties, I judged, a shade over or under six feet, broad-shouldered, rather handsome. He had wavy light brown hair and high cheekbones. Dark glasses prevented me from seeing the color of his eyes.

"I'm not joking," he said harshly.

I sipped my rapidly cooling coffee. "I know, and I assure you that I'm plenty scared. I'm just not very surprised, what with the recent crime wave the papers have been screaming about. But I won't give you any trouble. Our insurance will cover the loss."

"Good. Then let's get down to business."

"You want a doughnut?"

"No, thanks, just the money."

I took a glazed doughnut from the bag I'd held out to him and nibbled on it. "You know, I seem to remember seeing you someplace before. Maybe while you were casing the factory. That is what you call it, isn't it—when you look over a place before robbing it?"

"Now look," he said, starting to show impatience.

"All right, don't get excited. I just can't help being curious about the way real criminals operate, after seeing so much TV junk . . . Damnit, I'm *sure* your face is familiar. If you'd just take off those dark cheaters—"

"Mr. Carver, if you don't open that safe within thirty seconds, I'm going to kill you."

He made an ugly face to back up the threat, but I noticed that the gun muzzle trembled. I obediently put down my coffee cup and moved over to the big old-fashioned safe.

"So you know my name. That means either we've met before or you did a good job of casing this place. Or maybe you have inside information. Not many people know that we have a large amount of cash on hand tonight. Usually we finish totaling up all the collections from our vending machines in time to reach the bank before it closes. And it couldn't be just a coincidence that you knew I—one of the few people who knows the safe combination—would be working late tonight."

The gun muzzle followed me to the safe and steadied again. "I think you're doing all this talking to stall me until you can reach an alarm button," he said. "Don't try it. I've cut all the wires."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't be that foolish. But I have been hoping our night watchman would show up. He usually drops around for a cup of coffee with me when I'm here this late."

He smiled in a way that made it obvious his eyes weren't cooperating with his lips. "That was pretty smart. You thought that mentioning the watchman would cause me to look outside and give you a chance to press the button, or go for a gun. But I've already taken care of that old fink.

"You didn't kill him?"

"No, he's just tied and gagged in a closet downstairs."

I breathed a sigh of relief and started turning the safe dial. "Well, you seem to have thought of everything. There's a little over twenty-seven thousand dollars here. I hope you don't mind taking small bills."

"Not at all."

"In the old days you would have been weighed down with nickles, dimes and quarters. But with the coin shortage, we've told our collectors to trade them to the store owners for paper money."

Suddenly I snapped my fingers and whirled around, nearly startling him into pulling the trigger. "I know where I've seen you! At a cocktail party someplace, several weeks ago. Tom Warren's housewarming? No, it was Fred and Alma Drysden—their tenth wedding anniversary. You danced a lot with my wife, Lola. Your name is Dan something, or Don."

"I think you've talked a little too much." His voice and expression were very grim.

"Sonofagun! So that's how you pick up information for your robberies. Still, I don't see how you could learn enough to—" The full impact of his words hit me and I swallowed dryly. "You mean, because I've recognized you, you'll have to kill me?"

"Just open the safe," he said softly.

"We could make a deal. I promise I won't identify you to the police." Sweat trickled down my armpits.

"Do you want me to be melodramatic and count to three?"

I remained half-turned toward

him in my squatting position before the safe, one hand on the dial. "I remember that evening perfectly, because Lola and I had an argument later about the way she carried on with you. She often does that in public just to embarrass me. But I've never really worried about her taking other men seriously, in spite of the difference between our ages. Though God knows she has enough other bad habits. Even with my vice-president's salary and bonuses, the way she spends money is—"

"I'm not interested in your family problems," Dan or Don something said. "And I'm getting tired of waiting."

"And I'm suddenly not in any hurry to open this safe," I snapped. "I've just had a very unpleasant thought. Lola has been unusually curious about my business activities lately. And there have been other little things that I didn't think much of at the time. A certain coldness to my attentions, telephone callers who hang up when I answer, occasions when she said she was going to visit a girlfriend—who later mentioned doing something else at that time. I'm quite sure she's never been unfaithful to me before, but with a good-looking young fellow like you . . ." I chewed my lips and glared at him.

"You could write fiction," he said sarcastically. "With an imagination like that."

"But this isn't fiction! It's a matter of saving my marriage, as well as my life. You've been seeing Lola behind my back, haven't you? She told you about the money and our office routine. My big mistake was thinking you were just a common stick-up man. But actually Lola sent you here to murder me and make it look as though I'd been killed resisting a robbery. Then you and she would have each other and the money, too."

I could tell by the tightening of his facial muscles that I had guessed right, but he tried to bluff it through. "I don't know where you get your crazy ideas," he said. "All I want is the money. Give it to me and I promise I'll tie you up and leave you unharmed."

"Sure, you'll promise anything, just like my dear wife," I sneered. "Can't you see what a sucker she's playing you for? I'll bet she hasn't even gone to bed with you yet."

He looked startled, then laughed.

"That's the main reason I've always trusted her," I went on. "She's young and beautiful and seems to ooze sex appeal but, as I found out too late, money is the only thing that can stimulate her passion. She's probably played you along and worked you up to the point where you'll do anything for just one night with her. And you'll be lucky if you get that much. She's using you as a tool to obtain her freedom, so that she can hook someone else with money and milk him dry."

I laughed scornfully at him. "You

poor simple-minded fool! You have the courage to kill a man, but not to force a rotten little teaser to give in. But then Lola is very skillful at that game. That's how she lured me into marriage."

He flushed and took a half-step toward me. As I'd hoped, he was too vain to ignore an insult against his virility. "You think just because you can't handle her, no man can, huh?" he smiled. "Well, for your information, old man, I had her the very day after we met. And I've been having her ever since—as often as you'd turn your stupid back. And each time she tells me how wonderful it is to have a real man, instead of a pathetic weakling like you."

He went on to describe in taunting detail his encounters with Lola, intent upon smashing my pride by convincing me he was telling the truth. None of it bothered me, until he mentioned her appendectomy scar. He could have seen it while at the beach, I told myself. She liked to sunbathe in a skimpy bikini. But he saw my momentary doubt and smirked triumphantly. I decided to play along with him.

"All right, I know when I'm beaten," I said dejectedly. "I hate to lose her, but I'd be a fool to throw away my life, too. You can have the money, and I'll agree to a divorce. That way, you won't have to risk a murder charge."

"It's a deal."

I knew he was probably thinking that he'd have to eliminate me as a witness to his theft anyway. But his main concern just then was to get into the safe, and that was exactly what I wanted him to do. I opened it and stepped aside. He came over and reached in for the money, keeping me covered with his automatic.

He looked very surprised when I drew the revolver I had put in my pocket before he arrived, and even more so when he triggered his gun and the hammer snapped harmlessly. I shot him in the arm and he dropped his gun with a gasp of pain.

"Get out," I ordered. "Or I'll kill you!"

He didn't wait to question my motives, but turned and ran for the door, clutching his arm. Using my handkerchief to avoid disturbing his fingerprints, I picked up his gun and replaced the firing pin Lola had taken from it that afternoon. Then I went to the phone and called her.

"Hello, darling. Everything worked out just fine. I have his gun and his fingerprints are on the safe. The Police will never believe that he didn't take the money."

"That's wonderful, sweetheart," she purred. "Hurry right home after they finish questioning you. I have the most darling new nightie to show you. You can see right through it."

"I can hardly wait."

I hung up and stared moodily out the window at the drifting snowflakes. Yes, he might have seen her appendectomy scar at the beach, but it wasn't likely in the middle of the

coldest winter we'd had in years.

I divided the money into two packets and hid them in the lining of my coat. Twenty thousand would cover Lola's debts, and with the rest I could hire a professional killer to take care of her sometime when I had a good alibi. It's a funny thing about the masculine ego, especially in a man of my age, I thought as I dialed the police. I loved Lola enough to risk my life indulging her extravagant tastes, yet I couldn't tolerate her making a cuckold out of me.

Somehow, that wasn't fair.

buddies

"A friend in need is a friend indeed . . . ," and Hap had a great need!

BY HERBERT LESLIE GREENE

HAP MCCANN was gut-shot, a slug low in his belly. He wailed in agony from the back seat of the stolen Ford. "My insides are fallin' out, my goddamn insides are fallin' out . . ." over and over, endlessly.

Curt drove through the night-shrouded city streets, his young face taut and white. His eyes were never still. They flicked over the streets before him, over the sidewalks, the alleys, with an intentness of perception born of sheer panic, and they went to the rear-view mirror steadily to peer wild-eyed at each pair of headlights coming up behind. "Stop it, Hap." he said tightly. "Stop it. Stop it!"

"It hurts . . . oh Jesus, it hurts. That bastard . . ."

"Ya gotta stop howlin'. I'm goin' nuts. I can't think. And I gotta think."

"It hurts."

"I know, man, I know. But we can't keep cruisin' like this. We'll get nailed sure. Sure! That guy is dead back there. We go anyplace for help they take one look at you and we're tied to him. We're dead too," Curt's throat was dry. His voice sounded raw and croaking to his ear.

Hap replied in a strangely reasonable tone. "Yeah, but Curto, my guts are fallin' out. No lie. I'm holdin' 'em in. Ya gotta do somethin'."

"I know . . ." Shut up, Curt cried in his mind, and in that mind he cursed his friend with the fury that had been, at the beginning, for the old man at the gas station, with his ancient revolver hidden away. But now, after an hour of frenzied driving, with that wailing constantly in his ears, now it was Hap he burned at, moaning, gut-shot, unlucky Hap. He knew it was wrong to feel what he was feeling, but he was scared, so scared, breaking under

the sudden weight of too much to carry. "Why did we do it?" he heard himself cry. "Why the hell did we do it?"

"If he didn't pull that gun we coulda made it." Hap groaned. "I had his roll in my hand, there was a lotta dough there, a lot . . . I was lookin' at the dough . . . I shoulda been lookin' at him. I never figured him to be brave . . . the old bastard." He let out an abrupt cackle. "Ya see the size o' that gun? Oh man, it musta shot cannon-balls. It feels like a cannon-ball." His breath caught, the words dissolved into a blood-filled, wracking cough.

"Shut up!" Curt barked. "Don't talk so damn much," He looked again into the mirror above his eyes, at the face of his friend. Hap was staring, his mouth hanging open. "I don't wanna die, Curt!" he murmured with new fear, as if the thought had finally penetrated the mire of his brain. "Hey . . ." it was an awed whisper. "Hey Curt, hey . . . I'm only twenty, buddy, I don't wanna die . . ."

"You ain't gonna die."

"I might, man, I feel like I could die. I'm shot to hell . . ."

"You keep gabbin' and you'll talk yourself to death."

"Ya gotta help me, buddy. Ya will, won't ya? We know each other all our lives. I never had a better friend then you. I'd help you, buddy. Ya gotta help me."

"I'm tryin'. If only you didn't kill him."

"I didn't mean to. He plugged me and my finger just went by itself. He didn't hafta start shootin'. If he didn't, I wouldn't of. The old bastard . . ." The ragged cough broke from him, deep and savage. "Oh mama!" he screamed. "My guts are fallin' out. . . !"

"Shut up!" Curt cried.

"It hurts . . . oh man, it hurts. . . !"

"What can I do, Hap? Tell me what I can do, Jesus, somebody tell me?"

The needle was on the wrong side of the gas gauge, moving down. Curt saw it and it was another ton pressing on his skull. He was driving without thought now, all his attention given to watching for the Law, the inevitable Law. He wept within, overflowing with a monstrous feeling of loss, as if all he possessed, of any true worth, had been snatched from him; his youth, his laughter, his peace, and he dwelt on that loss while his hands worked the wheel, seemingly detached from the rest of him, yet not really, for his palms were wet with sweat, fear-sweat.

There was a gradual lessening of light along the streets now and he found that he was steering the Ford out of the city, toward the country. He nodded to himself, pressed down on the gas and stared at the shafts of light spearing into the new darkness.

"Ol' buddy, you remember how we sat around, wonderin' if we could get away with it?" Hap's

voice drifted to his ears. Again it was strangely steady and sad now, deeply sad. "Buddy, we shoulda kept sittin'. Some goddamn crooks we are! Man, pitiful! We shoulda known it would get fouled up. We coulda been in the gin-mill now, drinkin', messin' with Hilda and that other tramp. We coulda been ballin' it, happy . . . We shoulda kept sittin', Curto."

"It's done!" Curt spat. "Let it lay! We'll get outta it. Nobody saw us. There ain't no connection . . ."

"Yeah, there is. It's in my gut. A goddamn cannon-ball . . ."

Curt swallowed. "Yeah, yeah . . ."

"Buddy, I'm scared . . . like a little kid, I'm scared . . ."

"We'll make it, Hap. Only quit cryin'. You'll drive me buggy." The voice in the back seat grated in his ears with it's erratic shifting from calm clarity to blind hysteria. The dismal sound of it was enhanced by the stillness developing outside the car. Trees flashed by now, stretches of meadow and field, tinged by the unnatural gray glow of the full moon. Curt lit a cigarette, sucked in hard, greedily.

"Gimme one, buddy," Hap pleaded.

"It ain't good for ya. You'll choke . . ."

"Man, I could use one. Come on, be a good guy."

Curt gave him one. In a moment Hap was twisting, coughing. Curt gripped the wheel tighter.

After awhile, with disconcerting awareness, Hap stated. "We'd be alright if I didn't catch it. We'd be in the clear. I'm sorry I screwed it up, buddy. You ain't gonna leave me, are ya?"

An icy chill settled over Curt. "Whatta ya thinkin' things like that for?"

"I'm thinkin' all kinds of things. I'm thinkin' I'm gonna die . . ."

"You ain't gonna die."

"It'd be better for you if I did. You'd be clear if I croaked. I'm on your back like a hump now. Ain't I?"

Curt threw the butt out the window. "Quit it," he said, soft, without heart. But the truth of it ripped at him with persistent claws. He glanced up at the mirror, at Hap's face. The eyes of it were closed, it was lined and set with pain. And the small voice in Curt's mind said the words at last: If you'd only die.

"No!" It tore out of him. Hap was his friend. Don't think of it, he raged at himself, don't dare think of it.

But it was alive and wriggling in his consciousness now and could not be driven out, for it shared the space up there with another very precise image: the electric chair.

I don't want to die! The cry was from his own soul this time, out of a pain as real, in it's way, as that in the torn belly of his friend. What am I gonna do? What? What?

It was after two in the morning now. The highway and the land bordering it stretched vast and de-

serted under the wash of the moonlight. It was like a dead world out there and Curt took pleasure in the thought. If the world was dead their troubles were over. He retained the image, fondled it.

Hap lay silent in the back seat. His face was horribly white except for the black smear of blood about his mouth. His lips moved. His eyes stared. He was dying. Curt settled deeper behind the wheel.

And headlights caromed from the mirror, blinding him. He almost screamed, so suddenly did they come. His heart pounded and his hand went to Hap's little .38 on the seat beside him. The cops! Oh Christ, the cops! He held the gun tight, tight. I don't want to die!

The car whooshed past, filled with laughing young people, moved ahead and away up the highway. He watched it go, sick with relief.

He saw the sideroad ahead and swung the Ford onto it. The road was rough, darkened by walls of trees. He gripped the wheel and kicked down on the gas. The car rocked and swayed and Hap came alive in back. He cried and called to God and the blood poured from his mouth.

Curt couldn't see beyond the reach of the headlights. It suddenly seemed that the road was gone. They pitched and skidded over broken and pitted ground and the trunks of the trees were in close. Hap was shrill now, screaming like a laboring woman.

Die, you bastard!

And he jammed on the brakes, grinding to a stop within inches of the looming woods blocking his path.

Then, except for Hap's moans, there was complete quiet. Curt lay his head against the sweat-damp wheel and sobbed weary, little-boy tears.

When he straightened, Hap was silent. Curt stared into the back seat blackness. "Hap?" Cautiously, prayerfully, he reached out and touched the form of his friend. The skin was cold. "Hap?" he said again, with the grief rising within him, grief for his friend, Hap McCann who was dead. All the life and laughter finished. "Aww Hap. I'm sorry, Hap."

And Hap moved and muttered, ". . . you're a bitch, Hilda baby . . ."

Curt shrieked with rage, kicked the door open and ran into the night, bouncing off trees, tripping over rocks and hedges, cursing from the depths of him that bastard who would not die. Who would not die and set him free.

He stumbled back to the car after what seemed like hours. He circled it like an Indian, moving in on it. There was not a sound from the blackness within, not a movement. He was dead. How much blood did a man have in him?

Curt opened the back door and the body of Hap McCann fell out, crumbled into a pile at his feet. "Hap!" he cried, and fell to his knees. "Hap . . ." He lifted the slack

form in his arms and wept hot tears over it. It was a brother dead in his grasp. It was more than a brother. Hap was dead. He cradled the body and moaned to it while through his mind flashed a thousand scenes of times past, of Hap alive and clean and young. "Why did we do it, Hap Oh Jesus, why?"

And Hap replied, ". . . buddy, my guts are fallin' out . . ."

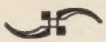
Curt dropped him and leaped back. He stared with utter disbelief as Hap squirmed and clutched at the earth and raved ". . . cannonballs . . . goddamn cannonballs . . ."

Curt dived into the car and came out with Hap's .38. He emptied the gun into Hap, four shots. They cracked hollow and small-sounding in the woods, in the clear air. And at every jerk of the trigger he yelled "Die, you bastard!" When the gun was empty he fell upon Hap and used the gun-butt.

He dragged the corpse a long way into the woods. With an ice-chopper from the trunk of the car he scraped out a hole. It was brutal work and it left him little strength to roll Hap in, on top of the .38, and to cover him up, laying rocks and branches over the mound. When he trudged back to the car a hint of gray laced the sky. The night was ending. It would never end in Curt's mind.

He drove slowly, with the last of the gas, to the outskirts of the city. There he abandoned the blood-drenched Ford and almost staggered to a subway station. He was home in half an hour, dragging himself up the tenement steps, letting himself in so as not to wake the family. Then, at last, falling across the bed, embracing it, crying with relief.

He slept all day and into the night. Then he got up, washed the dry sweat and grime off and went to the bar on the corner where he sat alone, over many beers, thinking of his friend, Hap McCann, and all they had meant to each other.



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